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P I Q U E .

A Novel.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "AGATHA BEAUFORT,"
ETC, ETC.

NEW EDITION.

LONDON:
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PIQUE.

CHAPTER I.

FRIENDLY WARNINGS.

"OH, Mildred! I have heard the strangest rumour this morning. Is it possible Lord Alresford is expected here to-day?" cried Helen Campbell, hastily flinging open the door of a small exquisitely furnished boudoir, in which her friend was sitting.

Mildred Effingham's fair face slightly flushed; she looked up from her drawing—a bunch of magnificent geraniums—and laying down her brush, said rather coldly,—

"You may well be surprised, Helen. When I reached home after our walk yesterday afternoon, I found papa in some consternation awaiting me here, with Lord Alresford's despatch in his hand, which had just arrived by a special messenger."

"And so it is true? I suppose we must make up our minds soon to lose you, Mildred. How desolate dear old Greysdon will appear!" exclaimed Helen with a sigh, divesting herself of her bonnet and cloak, and throwing herself on a low ottoman by Miss Effingham's side.

"Helen, that time is not come!" hastily rejoined Mildred; "do not talk of it: it makes me so miserable to think of quitting you all. How did you learn Lord Alresford's expected arrival? I had just written yonder little note, to beg you to come and spend the morning with me."

"Mamma walked to the Rectory early, and Mrs. Northcote told her she understood the park lodge-keepers had received orders from Lord Elvaston to be upon the look-out, for the earl was expected to arrive at the Priory about four this afternoon."

Mildred, who knew very well the gossiping propensities of good Mrs. Campbell, could not refrain from smiling.

"And was this all the news Mrs. Campbell gleaned?"

Helen felt slightly puzzled.

"Mrs. Northcote supposed your marriage would not long be delayed, which you know, dear Mildred, under all circumstances, was a very natural conclusion."

"Very!" exclaimed Mildred, petulantly; "considering that I have not one feeling, one thought, in common with the man who, to use his own words, hastens to claim me as his bride."

"Is it really so, Mildred? are these indeed your true sentiments?" said Helen, in a tone of grave anxiety.

"Helen, the thought of this marriage makes me utterly wretched. Nay, you must long have known this. During Lord Alresford's absence in Italy, the danger seemed less imminent; but his sudden return and arrival here, quite overpowers me. Read the cool manner in which he announces I must forthwith hold myself prepared to receive him as my future lord and master."

Helen opened the letter which Mildred thrust into her hands, and perused it without comment.

"Oh, Mildred, you must be prejudiced. Surely, judging Lord Alresford from this letter, you cannot accuse him of presumption; it appears to me perfectly respectful both towards yourself and Lord Elvaston," cried Helen, folding the letter.

"Towards papa,—yes. Papa thinks there never was such a paragon born into the world as Philip Tollemache!" exclaimed Mildred, pettishly, though a bright tear dimmed the lustre of her eye. "But say, my darling, grave counsellor," continued she, throwing her arm lightly round Helen's graceful neck, "where is this marvellous respect to myself, when Lord Alresford has not deigned to notify by a single word or line, his approaching arrival at the Priory to me, who certainly am most concerned in it?"

"Unjust!" exclaimed Helen, kissing the glowing cheek of her friend, and taking the letter from the table, she read: "In conclusion, dear Lord Elvaston, you will be good enough to present my most respectful regards and homage to Miss Effingham, and express my deep regret that she has not considered my two last letters from Florence worthy the honour of a reply —"

"Nay, stop, Helen!" exclaimed Mildred, now fairly melting into tears; "it is this calm superiority of manner which cuts me to the quick. What right has Lord Alresford to administer this covert rebuke in a letter to papa? He evidently despises, and considers me a child, and treats me accordingly."

"No, dearest, though I have never seen Lord Alresford, I

am sure he must, and does render homage to a mind and character such as yours : but, Mildred, why did you suffer this foolish misunderstanding to arise, by not answering his lordship's letters ? ”

“ Because I will not submit to be lectured, Helen. Unhappily, I chanced to mention my long ride alone with Colonel Sutherland to the ruins at Fernly. This meeting, as you know, was purely accidental, and as the colonel was riding the same way as myself, I certainly could not, with any regard to politeness, dismiss him from my side. Well, the *tirade* his lordship chose to write on the impropriety of Miss Effingham making herself so notorious, and hinting that such conduct would be perfectly inadmissible when she attained the sublime dignity of Lady Alresford, was perhaps unequalled. There was a great deal more besides, Helen, which I forget ; but I did not choose to submit to such tutelage.”

“ But, Mildred, will you not suffer remonstrance from the man with whom you are to spend your future life, and submit to be treated like a reasonable being ? ”

“ Lord Alresford is a great deal too good for me, Helen. I detest these marvels of propriety. Give me instead poor human nature, with all its failings ! Would that Lady Catherine Neville, whose transcendent virtue he is always quoting, had been elected for the exalted honour of wearing his coronet and presiding over the surpassing glories of Amesbury Park ! ” cried Mildred, passionately.

“ Lady Catherine Neville ! Lord Alresford's ward, is she not ? ” asked Helen, inquiringly.

“ Yes ; she is an heiress, and lives at Wardour Court, somewhere near Amesbury. Her father, Lord Willingham, died about a year and a half ago, and made the son of his old friend, the late Lord Alresford, his daughter's guardian.”

“ I wonder what kind of personage this Lady Catherine is ? ”

“ Do not trouble yourself, Helen ; you will not long be in the dark after his lordship's arrival. The earl brought Lady Catherine over from Italy, and established her at Wardour Court ; and, indeed, I should be ungrateful not to acknowledge my full obligations to her ladyship, whose sudden summons, I verily believe, prevented the solemnisation of our marriage six months ago.”

“ Hush, Mildred, hush ! it is positively wrong to indulge in this strain. It is a very long time since you saw Lord Alresford ; so perhaps, dearest, you may have formed an erroneous estimate of his character. How long is it ? ”

“ Two years.”

“ Nay, then, Mildred, it is quite possible you may be mistaken. At our age, two years make a vast change in opinions and sentiments.”

Mildred shook her head incredulously.

"You, know, Helen, I was quite a child when first betrothed to Philip Tollemache, and had no more choice or interest in the matter than yourself; save, perhaps, a childish feeling of elation on being told I was wife elect to the very handsome young man whom I heard every one around me laud, and who I gazed upon myself with sentiments somewhat akin to awe. His lordship then went abroad for some years, during the which we duly corresponded, and returned to England about two years ago with Lord Willingham and his daughter; and when he visited the Priory, whether he found the contrast too glaring between the virtues of the Lady Catherine and the faults of his betrothed, certain it is never were couple more unloverlike than ourselves. We did not actually quarrel; but move, speak, laugh as I would, always that calm, dark eye rested upon me. Often I know my conduct must have appeared giddy and undignified; but I was very young, and he ought to have made allowance: besides, I never was born to perform the rôle of a stiff, starched dame, abounding in furbelows, and *bienséances*! Well, Helen, the upshot of the whole matter was, that Lord Alresford, after remaining our guest for two months, was suddenly called away to the continent on business; which he took care to state required a very brief term to transact. Nevertheless, from the palazzo of the Willinghams at Florence, he wrote to papa requesting his permission to delay our marriage for another year—and *nous voilà*!"

"But, Mildred, if it were all along your serious intention to fulfil the engagement contracted for you, how very strange not to employ this period, and the advantage you possessed of learning his lordship's sentiments and wishes, in moulding your habits and tastes to his—which ever must exercise so essential an influence over your future happiness. I cannot understand it!"

"Nay, that was as much his lordship's province as mine," exclaimed Mildred, tossing her beautiful head, though tears glistened in her eyes. "Others, Helen, eagerly proffered that homage which Lord Alresford so studiously withheld!"

Helen Campbell raised her clear eyes inquiringly. Miss Effingham's brow crimsoned.

"Perhaps you will find ere long that all their flattery has not the value of one simple word of commendation spoken by your betrothed, Mildred," replied she, seriously.

"Helen, are you also suddenly become a partisan of the carl?" exclaimed Mildred, in a tone of pique. "I tell you, I never can love one who exacts so much for himself. I might just as well attempt to endow with vitality one of the glowing flowers on this paper before me, as to raise myself to his standard."

"Then why marry him, Mildred? It would be far more honourable and better principled to decline the engagement at once."

"Oh, could I think myself at liberty so to do! But, Helen, I will tell you the history of it," cried Mildred, earnestly, "and you shall judge. At the time old Lord Elvaston died, which happened when I had attained my tenth year, his title descended to papa, as you know; but his estates, and amongst them this beautiful old place, reverted to the late Earl of Alresford. Papa and he (as I think I have before told you, Helen) were intimate friends, schoolfellows, and fellow collegians. The earl was immensely wealthy, and most generously proposed to papa to cede his right to the Elvaston estates, provided the miserable little heiress-presumptive of the title was betrothed to his only son—who had then just, or nearly, attained his majority. Upon this solemn contract and agreement, papa has alone for the last ten years held the right over these estates; and upon its accomplishment, Helen, depends his future tenure. If any objection arises on the part of Lord Alresford, the estates devolve wholly and entirely to papa, in accordance with a deed executed by the late earl; and—though I acknowledge his lordship to be noble and generous enough to set me free should I demand it—yet, did the violation of the contract proceed from me, I know papa would peremptorily insist on yielding up every acre of the property; and he would be only just, Helen—for even then we should be deeply indebted to the earl."

"My poor Mildred, is there then no escape?" cried Helen, gazing with painful emotion on the flushing cheek of her friend. "Surely Lord Elvaston, who loves you so tenderly —"

"No, Helen! Nothing could be done, dearest, unless it were the spontaneous act of Lord Alresford to set me free. Think! could I by any deed of mine deliberately exile papa from a home he loves so much? and dear mamma likewise, who is so proud of this beautiful place? Could I drive them both forth in their declining years, to support a peerage on the paltry pittance of a poor commoner?"

"Dear Mildred, do not excite yourself thus!" exclaimed Helen, throwing her arm around her friend's neck, and kissing away the tears on her cheek. "Every one speaks so well of Lord Alresford, that in time you must learn to love him; and, perhaps, even when you see him again, you will be amazed at your present prejudice. I know you have no serious attachment: for I cannot bring myself so to designate your foolish flirtation with Colonel Sutherland."

"Sutherland esteems me as I feel I ought to be appreciated, Helen. Contrast the warmth of his devotion, short as is the

time since we first met, with his lordship's cold indifference."

"But surely you would not marry Colonel Sutherland, even were you free to do so, Mildred! A man who has but his handsome person, and a most surpassing facility in uttering light flatteries and empty nothings, to boast of."

"He loves me—which is more than my affianced husband does!" exclaimed Mildred, vehemently. "However, though I cannot insist on my release from this engagement, I will be no hypocrite; and Lord Alresford shall know full well he is dragging a reluctant bride to the altar!"

At this instant a sharp rap at the door made Helen start to her feet. Mildred raised her head from the sofa-cushion, and hastily dried her tears. In a few seconds the boudoir door opened, and a pretty, coquettish-looking damsel stood on the threshold, twirling between her fingers an artificial branch of splendid scarlet japonica.

"Come in, Aglaë!" exclaimed Miss Effingham.

"Pardon, Mesdemoiselles," said Mademoiselle Aglaë, advancing trippingly into the apartment: "but milédi command me to come and see wedder dese flowers be suited to Mademoiselle Effingham's head. Milédi order me to prepare your white silk glacée, Mademoiselle, for dis evening, and you are to wear dis wreath also. Ciel! quelle pose gracieuse!" exclaimed the pretty soubrette, lightly twining the glowing flowers amid Mildred's jetty curls. "Ah! milor sera enchanté ce soir de la beauté de sa belle fiancée! Regardez donc, Mademoiselle Campbell, le corsage de la robe encore orné d'un bouquet de ces fleurs brillantes, Mademoiselle sera parfaitement mise!"

"That will do, Aglaë. Take the flowers away. I will wear anything mamma and you arrange, only I cannot be disturbed just now," said Mildred, languidly.

"Ah, Mademoiselle Campbell, quelle joie aujourd'hui pour milédi——"

"Where is mamma?" interrupted Mildred, impatiently.

"Lady Elvaston is sitting in de salon writing, and I was to give her ladyship's kind loove to you, Miss Campbell, and say, she hope to see you dis evening at dinner. Sainte Vierge! comme Mademoiselle aura l'air ravissante dans sa robe de noce!" and away Mademoiselle Aglaë was bounding, when she suddenly stopped short, and returned. "Have you any furdre command for me, Mademoiselle? What shall I say to milédi, Miss Campbell?"

"Helen, dearest, you must positively come this evening," whispered Mildred, as she saw her friend hesitate. "You may go, Aglaë. I will give mamma Miss Campbell's answer."

"I wonder wedder his lordship would prefare seeing Mademoiselle's hair dress en bandeaux, or in ringlets," murmured Aglaë to herself, surveying artistically Mildred's small head. "Bien Mademoiselle, I shall tell her ladyship;" and with a low courtesy the soubrette vanished.

"Helen, I will hear no denial; come you shall this evening."

"But, Mildred, on this first evening of Lord Alresford's arrival, will it not appear rather intrusive if I accept your mamma's kind invitation?"

Miss Effingham laughed.

"Nay, Helen, you will make one only among many similar delinquents. We have a dinner party to-night; though, of course, our guests were all invited before we heard of Lord Alresford's intended arrival. Colonel Sutherland dines here. Dear mamma, when she chose the japonicas for my hair, little dreamed she was selecting the colonel's favourite flower," cried Mildred, perversely tossing her head, as she stooped and picked from the floor a bud which dropped from the wreath during Aglaë's manipulations.

"Mildred, I conjure you be careful what you do. Depend upon it, Colonel Sutherland's purpose is merely to lure you into an empty flirtation. How unfortunate it so happens he should have been invited to the Priory the very day of Lord Alresford's arrival!"

"If my conduct excites so intolerably his lordship's disapprobation, he had better set me free at once, which certainly would be his wisest plan. By-the-bye, Helen, did you observe, when reading the earl's letter, that Sir Gerard Baynton accompanies him here on a visit to papa?"

"Yes; I was going to ask about him. Is Sir Gerard a friend of yours, Mildred?"

"No, not exactly a friend; a slight acquaintance only: but I predict, Helen, you will be smitten with the baronet. He is young, handsome, rich, and does not consider himself quite such a paragon and model as my noble betrothed. Sir Gerard apparently is all lively animation, though I suspect few possess a keener faculty for reading motives and character than he does. He is a most intimate friend of Lord Alresford's: they travelled together a good deal on the continent; and this, you know, dearest, is a sufficient certificate of kindly nurture. Ah, Helen, how I wish he would fall in love with you!"

"What a vision!" replied Helen Campbell, laughing. "Who would ever dream of Sir Gerard Baynton falling in love with the daughter of the poor curate of Greysdon?"

"Not so impossible!" rejoined Mildred, gazing on Helen's

clear, intellectual face, and finely moulded figure. "Sir Gerard

"Mildred! come down here for a few minutes, dear child. Ashford has just brought in some magnificent plants, and I want you to give directions how you will have them placed in the conservatory," exclaimed the soft voice of Lady Elvaston from below.

"In a moment, mamma," cried Miss Effingham, rising and opening the door. "Come, Helen, I am sure your advice will be needed. I shall have no heart in arranging these beautiful exotics for Lord Alresford to gaze upon."

"For shame, Mildred!"

"Come!"

"Indeed, you must excuse me. I promised papa to be at home by half-past three. I have something to do for him this afternoon."

"Well, remember we dine at seven."

"Mildred," whispered Helen, emphatically, as they embraced at the door of the saloon, "I conjure you to consider that, perhaps, the entire happiness of your future life depends on the events of this evening. If you intend to fulfil this engagement, greet Lord Alresford as one whose affection and good opinion you prize."

"Fear not, Helen. I will ponder your counsel," said Miss Effingham, bounding away.

Helen paused a moment, then crossed the hall, and passing through a glass door at its end, proceeded along a path through the garden and shrubberies leading to the village. She walked on slowly, for there had been much in her brief interview with Miss Effingham to arouse meditation, both intense and painful. She trembled for her friend's happiness. She felt that Mildred was on the verge of keen, and it might be severe trial: for, with all her many admirable and engaging qualities, Helen dreaded the wayward petulance of her character.

Indulged, and idolised by her parents and friends, Mildred Effingham had as yet seen everything, and everybody, save her betrothed, bend to her caprice, and all obstacles to her will vanish beneath the sunny influence of her smile. Impatient of censure or the slightest control, her spirit, pure, bright, and joyous, roamed at will, and tasted capriciously of all the varied delights and gifts with which she was surrounded. But, unfortunately for her future peace, this wayward perversity was not the only defect which tarnished a character otherwise noble and lovable—she lacked, also, undeviating candour, and openness of disposition. With the purest, and most righteous intentions, Miss Effingham, even when convinced of the justice and necessity of any defined course of

action, especially if it wounded her *amour propre*, or infringed in the smallest degree on her self-complacency, suffered this irresolution of character to overpower her better judgment. As yet, her life had been so unclouded as to afford little room for its full development; but Helen Campbell, her chosen friend and companion, early detected and grieved over many trifling indications of this grave failing, justly apprehending, that as years rolled on and Mildred was called to lay aside her butterfly existence, and act, it might prove a source of much bitter disquietude.

Early taught, by the universal applause which everywhere greeted her, to believe her beauty and wit irresistible, and that she was born to carry the world by storm, Mildred found, with feelings of intense pique and resentment, that, of all her friends, her betrothed husband, Lord Alresford, appeared least sensible of and penetrated with her numerous attractions. Long she pertinaciously resisted the conviction, that he actually presumed to hold up the Lady Catherine Neville as a model in many things worthy of her imitation; but the earl's terse, conclusive sentences admitted of no misconstruction. Scorning, then, the task of self-examination, and piqued already at his former refusal of her hand, Mildred, with characteristic perversity, obstinately attributed the earl's insensibility to Lady Catherine's blandishments. Yet, as far as her real knowledge went, this suspicion was reared on very slight foundation. That they had travelled together in Switzerland, and that the earl spent much of his time in Venice with Lord Willingham, and eulogised Lady Catherine's devotion to her invalid father, formed in reality the sole basis of her secret misgiving.

Mildred had formed her own estimate of the devotion and deference due to her from her betrothed, and she felt mortified that the reality fell so far short of her expectation. Her self-love was wounded, and her awe of him increased. She had yet to learn that perfect mutual confidence must be the bond of the entire devotion she expected, without any definite design of making a corresponding return. Her letters consequently grew colder and fewer, and those she received from the earl in return were conned with keen, jealous scrutiny. Lord Alresford, since the period of his father's decease, held a high diplomatic post abroad, for which his great talents eminently qualified him: thus unfettered by his restraining presence, Mildred had basked in the sunshine of her home prosperity, banishing, as far as possible, from her mind the thought that her faith and allegiance were pledged to another. Lord and Lady Elvaston, however, keenly felt the indifference their daughter evinced towards the man to whom their own personal and peculiar circumstances had bound her; but,

really proud of her alliance with one so distinguished and sought after as Lord Alresford, they lulled themselves in the hope that, on a more intimate acquaintance with the earl, her repugnance and awe would vanish ; while her exquisite loveliness of person and cultivated mind, they doubted not, must finally captivate and enchain his affection.

This reasonable hope might have been realised, but for one untoward circumstance. While smarting at the contents of a letter from the earl, not quite so laudatory as she could desire, and containing more reminiscences, past and present, of the Lady Catherine than she deemed needful, Mildred met Colonel Sutherland, the officer in command of the newly-arrived regiment, stationed in the adjoining town of Stanmore, at a grand ball given to celebrate the majority of a baronet, their near neighbour. Fascinated at once by his homage and evident admiration of her beauty and wit, and amused by the ease and brilliancy of his conversation, and his talent for repartee, which kept her own constantly on the *qui vive*, Mildred abandoned herself, without a thought of the consequences, to the daily-increasing pleasure she found in his society. Betrayed by her wayward craving for applause, and the entire appreciation of her numerous attractions, which every act of Colonel Sutherland's soon seemed to bespeak, day after day her sunniest smiles greeted him at the Priory ; while, unhappily, Lady Elvaston's better judgment, vanquished by her daughter's pertinacious self-will, offered no obstacle to these frequent interviews.

Vainly Helen Campbell remonstrated, for invariably Mildred laughingly set aside her scruples ; nor, indeed, had she even suspected, until her late interview, the sway Colonel Sutherland's flattery had achieved over her friend's fancy : for still Helen indignantly rejected the notion that Mildred's heart could challenge fellowship with that of a man so shallow, and of such little intrinsic worth.

Absorbed in these reflections, and wondering how Mildred's romance would terminate, Helen wandered on. The walk she had been pursuing was that by which the family at the Priory reached the village church, and the gate at the end of the shrubbery opened into the churchyard. Mr. Campbell inhabited a very pretty rural house, looking down on the church, with a sloping garden, separated from the churchyard by a deepsunk fence. The taste and industry of Mrs. Campbell had converted her dwelling into a bower of sweets, and garlands of bright blossoms clustered round the windows and porch, mingling with vigorous shoots of ivy, which at this early season of the year put forth its leaves of most brilliant green.

As Helen entered the garden, Mrs. Campbell, who was sitting

in the verandah close to the dining-room window, which opened on the lawn, laid down her work, and advanced to meet her. Helen at once perceived, by the pleased, important expression of her face, that her mother was in one of the most felicitous moods, and wondering what fresh news she had heard, hastened forwards, as the declining afternoon sun warned her she had not much time to devote to her father's service, before the important process of dressing for the Priory dinner-party commenced.

CHAPTER II.

MATRONLY SCHEMES.

"So, I understand, Helen, Lord Alresford brings his friend Sir Gerard Baynton down with him to-day," exclaimed Mrs. Campbell, when her daughter came within hail.

"Yes, mamma, both Sir Gerard and the earl arrive this afternoon," replied Helen.

"I accidentally met Mrs. Slater, the housekeeper, two or three hours ago, and staid to have a chat with her in Mill Lane. She was returning from Farmer Deak's, and had been to desire him to send four chickens daily up to the Priory until further orders. I heard all the news; and of course you know there is to be a large party there to-night: Mrs. Wedderbourne and her niece, the Tennysons, Mr. Northcote, and of all men in the world, Colonel Sutherland! It does surprise me, a man with Lord Elvaston's nice sense of honour and propriety should tolerate the foolish flirtation which has been going on these last six months between the colonel and his daughter; and still more, that the former should be invited to meet Lord Alresford," said Mrs. Campbell, running on with her usual volubility.

"You forget, mamma, that all these guests were invited before Lord Elvaston knew of the earl's arrival."

"Possibly. But then he should devise any excuse, rather than compel his daughter's betrothed husband to associate with a man whose conduct has rendered her notorious all over the county. My dear Helen, you really ought to give Mildred a hint upon the subject: even that busy Miss Jenks intimated to me this morning that it was rumoured throughout the village, Miss Effingham would have been as well pleased had his lordship prolonged his continental tour."

"Oh, who would listen to an old gossip like Miss Jenks? I am sure Mildred meant nothing dishonourable towards her

future *caro sposo*," cried Colin Campbell, a fine spirited boy, firing up when he heard his mother's censure on the conduct of his favourite Mildred. "Sutherland is a fine, handsome fellow, and deserves a pretty wife. But, Helen, are you not going to the Priory this evening?"

"Yes. Lady Elvaston was good enough to ask me, and as I knew of no particular objection, I promised, at Mildred's request, to go."

"Of course: you did perfectly right, Helen," said Mrs. Campbell, with a well-pleased expression of countenance. "I should have wondered much had you not been asked. Mrs. Northcote said she supposed you would."

"I am very glad to go. Dear Mildred! I feel extremely anxious to see the man to whom it appears her destiny soon to be united; but I do so regret that Colonel Sutherland is to be at the Priory to-night. 'Tis, indeed, a very unpropitious commencement of the earl's visit," said Helen, anxiously.

"If the colonel could but divine your uneasiness, Helen, and would tumble off his horse, break his neck, or, in fact, do just anything to prevent him taking his seat at the Priory table, I should pronounce him a capital accommodating fellow. But, my dear, darling little Helen, you may spare your anxiety; for 'tis quite clear to me his dignified lordship may save himself the trouble of posting down, and setting our quiet village in an uproar: Sutherland has already won the prize," exclaimed Colin Campbell, laughing.

"Nay, Colin, do not jest," replied Helen, seriously. "I feel convinced, from all I have heard this morning, that Mildred, within the next three months, will become Lady Alresford."

"Then 'tis a monstrous shame, if she does not like the earl—that's all I have to say on the subject," exclaimed Colin, indignantly.

"That Colonel Sutherland's intentions were never serious, I have quite concluded; and, indeed, Mrs. Northcote did once say, she heard it was reported in the regiment, that he had long been engaged to Miss Conway, Lord Normanton's sister. Nothing can excuse his marked attention to Mildred, save a knowledge of her long engagement; which he pleased to suppose rendered his extravagant homage harmless. I shall take care and ascertain to-night whether he really knows of it; and if not, I will assuredly point out the deep injury his continued attention will inflict," said Helen, resolutely.

"I wish I were going with you, Helen. How you will enjoy yourself! dear Lady Elvaston is so kind!" exclaimed Henrietta Campbell, a girl of fifteen, looking up from her book, over which she had been poring an hour or more.

"Nonsense, child! mind your book," said Mrs. Campbell, sharply, suddenly rousing from a fit of musing, in which she had indulged during the last ten minutes. "I suppose Sir Gerard Baynton is not married, Helen?"

"Oh, no, mamma; Sir Gerard is still a gay, fascinating young cavalier; rich, handsome, and, as Mademoiselle Aglaë would express it—*un partie inexceptionable*," replied Helen, carelessly.

"The Chauntry is a fine old mansion, not very distant from Amesbury Park; which, I suppose, explains the intimacy between Sir Gerard and Lord Alresford. Sir Gerard's mother, Lady Emily Banyton, was one of the kindest friends of my early days. Your father's first curacy after we married was the village of Weldon, and when we quitted it Sir Gerard had grown a fine spirited boy of twelve years old. I suppose we shall frequently see him here during his visit at the Priory; though, probably, Helen, you will spend some time with your friend there before her marriage—should it ever ripen into one."

Helen smiled.

"Perhaps," replied she. "But where is Archy? He was to have worked with me at those papers I promised to transcribe for papa this afternoon. Colin, you may as well help, for time glides away so quickly, and seven is the Priory dinner-hour."

"Archibald is gone to Stanmore to consult Colonel Sutherland about the purchase of a horse. But come along, Helen, I am quite at your service," said Colin, throwing aside his book.

"Helen, my dear, never mind those troublesome papers this afternoon," cried Mrs. Campbell, earnestly. "I feel certain your father will not want them for some days hence. Stooping will make your head ache——"

"And your nose red, Helen! I advise you to weigh well the tremendous consequences of appearing in such a plight before two mighty potentates like Lord Alresford and Sir Gerard Baynton," cried Colin, laughing, as he followed his sister out of the room.

"Mrs. Campbell sat silently and intently plying her needle. Henrietta having at length accomplished her task closed the book, and drawing forwards a low stool, took her work and seated herself opposite to her mother by the side of the open window; and carefully abstaining from the slightest movement likely to dispel the train of thought she knew the former loved to indulge, quietly beguiled the time with her stitches, every now and then wistfully gazing on the fragrant flower-beds in the garden beyond.

"Really, Henrietta, you quite exhaust my patience! Look where the cat has dragged your beautiful bright wool," ex-

claimed Mrs. Campbell, suddenly looking up, and directing her young daughter's attention to the gambols of a fine Persian cat with her ball of amber worsted, which she had suffered to roll from her knee. "This is so like one of your careless tricks, after your sister's trouble in selecting the wools for you! You cannot fancy that Mildred, for whom you destine this little souvenir, will prize a dirty, faded cushion. Come hither, child! I see the stitch is wrong. You always will persist in dragging the thread four times through the loops. Fetch the ball, and put it in your apron pocket. Now give me the crotchet-hook, and look!"

Henrietta made no reply; but after obeying her mother's directions, quietly reseated herself, and applied with renewed assiduity to her work.

Mrs. Campbell also relapsed into silence, and continued her stitching with the utmost vigour. A quarter of an hour thus elapsed.

"I wonder whether Mrs. Daws has sent home Helen's silk dress?" at length said she. "Henrietta, perhaps you can tell me?"

"I don't know, mamma; but I fancy when Helen and I were walking yesterday, and met Mrs. Daws, she apologised for not being able to send the dress home until next week, on account of having had mourning to make."

"That is her invariable practice," grumbled Mrs. Campbell. "Milliners, when they have been negligent in attending to one's orders, always excuse themselves on the plea of having had mourning to make, which could not by any possibility be delayed. I shall assuredly send a message to Daws this evening. I like people to be punctual. Ah! I see your brother is returned from Stanmore. I must go and hear how he succeeded with the colonel, and also hurry Helen, for it is nearly six o'clock," said Mrs. Campbell, rising from her chair, as her eldest son Archibald passed by the window on his way to the stable.

For a moment Henrietta let fall her work, and leaning forwards watched her mother's quick step across the garden. Occasionally Mrs. Campbell paused in her progress to pick up a truant leaf or straw, or to tie up the drooping blossoms of some favourite flower; accidents her quick eye instantly detected, and her hand as speedily rectified, for it was one of her maxims never to defer to a future hour what might easily be accomplished in the present; besides which, she had no idea that a walk, circumscribed even as one through the length and breadth of her own domain, although with a definite object at its end, should be profitless, or unmarked *en passant* by any instance of that restless activity at once the business, and delight of her life.

Mrs. Campbell was renowned throughout the neighbourhood for the notable government of her household, over which in all things, she ruled with undivided sway ; as the mild, studious habits of Mr. Campbell made him, on every occasion, carefully abstain from interference with her projects, or from provoking the overwhelming flood of argument which she always poured out in their defence. Besides the well-being of the household, the future prospects of her children were ever subjects of Mrs. Campbell's unceasing contemplation. The village of Greysdon was situated in the very heart of what is emphatically termed "a good neighbourhood;" and though the Campbells held a rank which usually, from straitened means and other causes, debars much social intercourse with the surrounding magnates, such was not their case, as Mr. Campbell's fortune was easy, if not comparatively affluent, independent of his profession. Besides which, it was generally known he had had several times the opportunity of rising to the ranks of the beneficed clergy ; but his attachment to Greysdon, and its venerable rector, ever influenced to induce him to decline any such overtures : a decision his managing wife cordially approved, as she had good grounds for feeling a tolerable degree of certainty, that on the decease of Mr. Northcote, it was the intention of Lord Elvaston, the patron of the living of Greysdon, to appoint her husband his successor. The powerful patronage of Lady Elvaston also not a little contributed to the almost universal popularity of the Campbells. Helen's pure, thoughtful mind and gentle manners wrought upon Lady Elvaston irresistibly ; while the simple, yet truthful tone of her conversation, her unswerving avoidance of flattery and all undue *empressment* to win favour and notice, were charms Mildred Effingham never could withstand ; and she invariably turned with feelings of renewed delight and relief to Helen's society, after companionship with most of the young ladies in the neighbourhood whose pretensions were more on a level with her own. From the days, then, when Helen returned home from school for the holidays, and with feelings and demeanour half shy, half curious, though always self-possessed, paid her weekly visit to the school-room of Lord Elvaston's young heiress, their attachment had gradually grown, and strengthened itself, until, at the period when our history begins, it was cordial, and familiar as that of sisters.

The Campbells' nearest county neighbours, next to Lord Elvaston's family, were the Tennysons of Settringham. Sir Richard Tennyson had just attained his majority, and inhabited the family mansion with his mother and sister. With a large fortune at his disposal, Sir Richard plunged with youthful ardour into the dissipated society amidst which evil chance,

no less than inclination, led him. With no restraining hand to guide him in his choice of companions, his jovial college friends expounded, and contrived to inspire him with a deeper veneration for the mysteries of the chase, than for all the lore of Alma Mater. On attaining his majority, therefore, he became master of the M——shire hunt, and for six months of the year his table was crowded with sporting colleagues—a society anything but improving to his young sister; while he contrived to get through the remainder of the year by horse-racing, rowing, &c.; at intervals, also, most obligingly risking his own neck, and that of any good-natured friend, by occasional displays of prowess as a first-rate whip. Though Mrs. Campbell knew that hitherto dogs and horses were the charms, and sporting the object of Sir Richard Tennyson's life, she had been worldly enough, some time previous to the commencement of our story, to scheme the capture of the baronet's hand for her daughter; especially as at one period Helen appeared the object of his unbounded admiration. This design she was, however, at length compelled reluctantly to forego, on account of Helen's unconquerable opposition, and Lady Elvaston's marked disapproval; for without the latter's co-operation, she could scarcely hope to achieve the ambitious project. To get Helen speedily, and if possible, grandly married, was the aim of her life; for impetuous and excitable as was Mrs. Campbell, her mind was not so fitful and shallow, as her actions would often denote, and the troublesome consciousness would often intrude, whenever she allowed herself to think, that her daughter, not only by her close intimacy with Miss Effingham, but by the society this privilege entailed, was elevated out of her natural station in life; and her solicitude was painfully aroused for the reaction which might afterwards ensue in Helen's mind, should she fail to fix herself as a permanent star in her friend's sphere. In fancy, Mrs. Campbell, with a mother's anxiety, realised the discontent and secret disgust which probably would arise even in a mind well poised as Helen's, when lack of that patent passport to consideration—riches, should one day banish the luxury, refinement, and glitter of life, in which she at present so largely partook with her friend. Sir Gerard Baynton's visit, however, dispelled for the present these unpleasant forebodings. Many instances of his boyish partiality for Helen were recalled, and carefully pondered over, and even in Mrs. Campbell's brief walk down the garden, to judge by the unwonted animation of her countenance, imagination clothed her visions in brightest hues. Luckily, what Mrs. Campbell dreamed for the moment, she devoutly believed would come to pass; and as her mind assumed a corresponding serenity, curiously enough, her endless *chateau en Espagne* added not a little to the tranquillity of her household

But to return from our digression.—Henrietta still sat at her work, when her sister, arrayed for her expedition, looking fresh and blooming as a rose, entered the room. Presently Mrs. Campbell's hurried step was heard in the passage.

"Helen, what have you got to fasten your berthe with in front, child? Ah, I see you are ready," cried she, hastily opening the door. "Your dress is very becoming," continued Mrs. Campbell, complacently; "where did you get these beautiful flowers from?"

"Archy begged them somewhere during his ride this morning," replied Helen.

"I suppose from old Mrs. Wedderbourne; for he took Dornton on his road from Stanmore. Archy is gone to bring round the ponies, Helen, and intends to drive you to the Priory. Oh, here he comes," cried she, going to the window. "Archibald, let Sam hold the ponies, and come here a moment. I want him to tell you, dear, what Colonel Sutherland hinted about Miss Effingham. Tell your sister what the colonel said respecting the Priory marriage, Archy," exclaimed Mrs. Campbell, as her son entered the room.

"Oh, mother, nothing very important. He supposed only that the long delayed match would soon come off; thought Mildred would make a most fascinating peeress, and inquired whether Alresford was jealous."

"Then he knew of her long engagement," exclaimed Helen, reddening.

"Under all these nonchalant queries, however, I could detect a deep vein of melancholy. I am convinced Sutherland feels keenly his altered position: and I wonder who the deuce would not, after being smiled upon by such a seraph as Mildred," rejoined Archibald Campbell, warmly.

Mrs. Campbell shook her head sagaciously.

"We shall see! I cannot imagine his magnificent lordship arm in arm with a coquette of a wife."

"Come, Helen, unless you mean to fast to-day, we had better set off. The earl's travelling chariot entered the Bingley lodge-gate, as I passed two hours ago. Are you well wrapped up?"

"Fit to encounter the biting frosts of Siberia," exclaimed Helen, laughing gaily as she stepped into the carriage.

"Make my kind remembrances to Sir Gerard Baynton, Helen, and say what pleasure it will give me to renew my acquaintance with him," screamed Mrs. Campbell, as the carriage whirled away.

CHAPTER III.

A DINNER AT THE PRIORY.

At a quarter past six precisely, the modest equipage of the curate of Greysdon passed the Priory gates. As they drove through the beautiful park towards the mansion, Helen unconsciously sank into a deep fit of abstraction. She felt uncomfortable; her heart misgave her, and all her anxiety and painful forebodings for Mildred returned in full force. Archibald laughingly rallied her several times on her gravity, and vowed she was meditating how, syren-like, to lure some hapless victim to destruction under the potent fascination of her treacherous spells. Helen smiled, but her gaiety did not revive; and her brother vainly continued his banter, until they drew up before the door of the mansion.

Helen lightly sprang from the carriage, and stood a moment under the porch.

"You need not expect to see me again much before midnight," exclaimed Archibald, gathering up the reins. "Look, here are some of Lord Elvaston's guests arriving," added he, directing Helen's attention to a low phaeton emerging from one of the park drives. "No; 'tis Lord Elvaston himself, and another gentleman! God bless you, my dear Helen! do not let these fine people turn your little head!"

Helen nodded saucily, then bounded across the hall and up the staircase, and hurried along, without encountering anyone, towards Miss Effingham's dressing-room.

Just at the door, she met Aglaë.

"Ah! c'est vous, Mademoiselle Campbell. Miss Effingham desire me to wait here to see wedder I can be of service to you."

"Where is Miss Effingham?" asked Helen, entering the room.

"Miss Effingham wish much to wait for you; but milédi came and fetch her about tree quarters of an hour since. Mais donc vous êtes charmante, Mademoiselle!" continued Aglaë, carefully divesting Helen of her numerous wrappers. "Sit down, please, and let me arrange your hair a leetle! Oh, milor est si beau! Very much more handsome than Monsieur le Colonel; il a un si noble démarche,—Mademoiselle doit être très heureuse! Permettez que je tire cette boude—ah! that is it,—c'est parfaite!"

"Well, Aglaë, tell me, at what o'clock did Lord Alres-

for I arrive?" asked Helen, approaching Mildred's luxurious toilette.

"His lordship arrive at about half-past tree."

"And was Miss Effingham in the saloon?"

"No, soon after you did leave, Mademoiselle was seized with a most dreadful mal de tête, looked so excessively pale and défaite, that even milédi advise her go try and sleep, until it was time to dress. The earl did stay with Madame, talking in de salon, while Sir Gerard went a drive with milord. Ah, Sir Gerard aussi, Mademoiselle, a quelque chose——"

"Well, never mind Sir Gerard, Aglaë. Is Miss Effingham better?" asked Helen, drawing on her gloves.

"Mademoiselle did take a teaspoonful of salvolatile, which made her better when she rise up about five. She was soon dress, but while I was combing her beautiful hair, she was so morne and silencieuse—I could not understand, avec un si noble fiancé! Milédi presently came, and fetch her away, I tink to her own private room, but a few minutes afterwards I did see her descend to the salon, conducted by the earl. Ah, Mademoiselle, nous Francaises nous faisons less choses d'une autre façon!"

Helen nearly laughed outright at this pathetic lament, but Aglaë was a favoured and very privileged individual.

"You laugh, Mademoiselle. But I tink it is time now for you to descend. Lady Elvaston say, she would explain why Miss Effingham did not wait; '—Helen already had divined—"but you were to enter the salon by de private porte of de boudoir, and she would be there to greet you, as she thought you would not like to make de grand entrée alone. You will do very well, Mademoiselle,—votre corsage vous va à ravir, et vos cheveux luisent comme du satin! Ah, attendez!" cried she, suddenly shutting the door she had opened for Helen's exit, "attendez! Sir Gerard is just descending!"

Helen retreated, and waited until she thought Sir Gerard had had time to establish himself comfortably below. She then went down, and with somewhat of a nervous sensation, it must be owned, opened the door of the boudoir and entered. This small apartment communicated by folding doors with the saloon where the majority of Lord Elvaston's guests were assembled. Lady Elvaston, however, according to her promise, was there; and when Helen appeared, was standing in earnest conversation with a very handsome young man. Helen timidly paused, but in a minute Lady Elvaston came towards her.

"My dear Helen," said she, in her low, soft voice, "I am very glad to see you. Mildred has been anxiously expecting you for some time. I suppose Aglaë delivered our message?"

"Yes. I feel much obliged by your kindness in waiting for me here, dear Lady Elvaston. I trust Mildred is better."

"Yes, she is in the next room talking to Colonel Sutherland; but before we go to her, I must introduce Sir Gerard Baynton. Sir Gerard, allow me to present you to Miss Campbell."

Sir Gerard bowed. Helen curtseyed, and immediately taking Lady Elvaston's arm, passed onwards into the drawing-room.

Just in the doorway they met Lord Elvaston.

"How are you, Helen? glad to see you," said he, good-naturedly. "Hope Mr. and Mrs. Campbell are well; but where is my friend, Archibald? I fancied I caught a glimpse of him as we returned from our drive."

Helen looked rather embarrassed; for kind-hearted as was Lord Elvaston, he had a strange faculty for always saying things at the wrong time.

"Oh, thank you. I am sure it would have given my brother great pleasure to have accompanied me; but he only returned home from a long ride, just in time to drive me here," replied she.

"Ah, indeed! Archibald is a fine young fellow, and a great favourite of mine. Baynton, had you much shooting in France?" said Lord Elvaston, passing onwards.

"I am sorry you did not bring one of your brothers. In my haste this morning, I forgot to request you to do so," exclaimed Lady Elvaston, pausing an instant. "But look at Mildred! how very perverse of her to appear so monopolised with Colonel Sutherland. Such conduct must excite the earl's serious displeasure, added to her ungracious reception of him this afternoon."

Miss Effingham sat rather apart on a low couch; but the room was too thronged with guests, to make her position in any degree remarkable. Never had Helen seen her look more radiantly beautiful. She was reclining nonchalantly on the couch, and her soft cheek flushed as she raised her eyes to the face of Colonel Sutherland; who, at the time Helen entered the room, was talking to her with great *empressement* of manner.

"Does she not look well this evening?" said Lady Elvaston, gazing proudly on her daughter; and then she added in a slight accent of annoyance—"How she can listen to that frivolous, superficial Colonel Sutherland, when she might, and ought to be conversing with Lord Alresford, does astonish me."

"T is an infatuation, dear Lady Elvaston, which Mildred's good sense will speedily overcome," replied Helen.

"Ah! but while shawdowed by the delusion, she will lose

the opportunity of fixing the esteem and attachment of a man, whom any woman might be proud to win. But now, Helen, I will introduce the earl, and then leave you to make your way as you can amongst all these people," said Lady Elvaston, beckoning to Lord Alresford, who immediately hastened to her side.

Helen eagerly raised her eyes, and after an earnest gaze, which, brief as it was, called a smile on the earl's face, inwardly confessed Aglaë's commendations were not overdrawn. Lord Alresford was tall, and his manner and carriage strikingly dignified, and self-possessed. As he approached, she was struck with the calm seriousness resting on his very handsome features, and involuntarily her eyes fell under the quick, penetrating look which met her own. Helen secretly gave Mildred more credit for courageous daring, than she had ever before awarded; for there was a haughty firmness in the expression of his lordship's features, which seemed to defy contradiction. Lady Elvaston went through the accustomed forms of introduction, and then Helen was irresistibly captivated by the graceful bow and fascinating smile, imparting quite an altered expression to his face; though she still firmly believed him capable, when occasion needed, of penning those strict reprimands of which poor Mildred so bitterly complained.

"Miss Effingham has often mentioned Miss Campbell's name, and always in terms of the warmest affection," said Lord Alresford courteously, glancing towards the spot where Mildred sat.

Helen smiled, said a few words in reply, and as Lady Elvaston was summoned at this moment to receive other guests, she passed on to speak to her friend.

"Oh, Helen, I am so glad you are come," cried Mildred, rising hastily, and stepping forwards to meet her. "Aglaë, of course, explained why I did not wait for you. Ah, here come the Tennysons," exclaimed she suddenly, as the door opened. "For Heaven's sake, Helen, sit down quickly by me, or I shall become the victim of Clara's brusqueries. Stay! I see mamma has just introduced Sir Gerard Baynton, so, perhaps, for the present, she will be blind to the position of her dear friend," said Miss Effingham, a disdainful smile curling her beautiful lip as she glanced on the towering figure of Miss Tennyson; who followed her mother and brother into the room, and after exchanging a few words with Lady Elvaston threw herself back on a chair, and turning to Sir Gerard Baynton, who happened to be seated near, commenced a most fluent series of interrogatories.

Sir Gerard at first appeared surprised, but in a few minutes apparently comprehending at once the peculiar character-

istics of his fair neighbour, entered with spirit into her humour.

Miss Tennyson's figure was commanding, and moulded on a large scale, and some there might be found who would even have pronounced her handsome, as she sat listening with animated face to Sir Gerard's lively replies. Her complexion was sallow, a defect increased by the yellow tinge cast by the vivid lilac dress she wore, and her hair and eyes were dark. The expression of her face was too harsh, and *prononcée*, and there was an abruptness in her gestures, and something brusque and imperious in the tone of her voice, the very reverse of feminine, which seldom, on a first introduction, conveyed a flattering idea of her amiability, or gentleness of temper. Her eyebrows were black, and strongly marked; her forehead low, and there was altogether a decided "throw off" in her manners and language (especially in the coolness with which she uttered and maintained the most outrageous assertions,) that at times, to her intense satisfaction, drew all eyes upon her.

Mildred, with a hasty gesture, took Helen's hand and drew her to a seat beside her.

"Will Miss Campbell allow me to wish her good-evening?" said Colonel Sutherland, as Helen seated herself. "Mr. Archibald Campbell was over at Staunmore this afternoon. Did you see him before you left home?"

"Yes," replied Helen, in some surprise.

"Then, doubtless, you know of our expedition to Burton's Mews, and that we have nearly purchased for you the little bay mare you admired so much, which Miss Tennyson rode last winter. She is to be sent to Greysdon to-morrow morning on a fortnight's trial. I hope you will still admire her."

"No, indeed; he never told me about it. Dear Archy, how kind and generous!" exclaimed Helen.

"How delightful, Helen," cried Mildred; "we can now ride to Fernly together. I was just proposing some such expedition to Colonel Sutherland." Mildred paused — her colour deepened as she caught the astonished expression of Helen's eye: she continued, however, with a light laugh, turning to the colonel, "Really, you men have neither tact nor discretion. Could you not perceive, by Helen's ignorance of her brother's expedition, that Mr. Archibald Campbell was preparing a delicate surprise for his sister to-morrow morning, which you have quite frustrated by your indiscreet revelation?"

"Upon my word, I sincerely beg Miss Campbell's pardon, and can only marvel at her brother's fortitude. Had I a sister only half as fair, my heroism would have succumbed, and I

should have told all before I had been in her presence ten minutes."

"Just what I should have divined," exclaimed Mildred, laughing. "For the satisfaction of a momentary impulse, you would pitilessly destroy the more perfect gratification of a future hour. *Tout pour le present, rien pour l'avenir.*"

"Tis a defect, I acknowledge; but my disposition never suffers me to put restraint on present feelings for the sake of a future brilliant *tout ensemble*. Besides, we men can never hope to equal the exquisite tact and delicacy of women in conferring a favour; we can but appreciate, and, as a poor acknowledgment, offer devoted homage," rejoined the colonel, in a low voice, while his eye rested on the glowing japonicas twined in Mildred's hair.

Miss Effingham's cheek flushed, while Helen unconsciously retreated as far as she could towards the end of the sofa.

"Yes; but I am persuaded if people would take things literally as they are, without ever perpetually diving and seeking for hidden meanings and motives, half the misconceptions which daily arise might be averted," observed Mildred, languidly.

"Ah! but if everything were taken *au pied de la lettre*, where would friendship—society—be? You know we are constantly having the disagreeable truth impressed upon us that this is an age of irony and insincere profession. However, at times the world finds me sceptical enough on some subjects; for instance, I sturdily refused until yesterday to give credence to the report that you were engaged to Lord Alresford. His lordship's visit was a very sudden one, was it not?"

"Very."

"I was amazed beyond expression when I heard of the earl's arrival at the Priory," persisted the colonel, fixing his eyes earnestly on her face.

"You could not have been more astonished than myself," responded Miss Effingham, haughtily, throwing herself back on the couch.

"Is it possible?"

Helen, who now and then caught a word of this *sotte voce* discourse, was in an agony; she dare scarcely look round. She resolved, however, to make a desperate effort to put an end to it.

"Mildred!" exclaimed she suddenly, "I want to hear all you know about the grand ball at Dornton Park next month. Archibald called on his road to Stanmore, and found Mrs. Wedderbourne deep in the mysteries of coloured lamps, festoons, and garlands."

"Why, Helen, I never remember your curiosity so strongly

excited about a ball before. However, yonder sits Miss Vincent, Mrs. Wedderbourne's niece, talking to Sir Richard Tennyson, and I dare say she will only be too happy to give you every detail after dinner," replied Mildred, recklessly turning again towards the colonel.

"I have not yet wished that every felicity may attend your union with Lord Alresford, Miss Effingham. May I not congratulate you?" resumed Colonel Sutherland, in a deep, earnest voice.

"Oh, certainly! When a thing is inevitable, it is best policy to take everybody's congratulations in good part, and not pause to analyse one's own feelings too closely," replied Mildred, looking down and commencing a most ruthless attack on her bouquet. "You remember the old adage, Colonel Sutherland—what cannot be cured—. . . Apropos, did you know a cousin of Sir Gerard Baynton's is about to join your regiment?"

Helen's cheeks burned. Meditating a speedy retreat, she gazed uncomfortably around, when, to her unspeakable consternation, she beheld Lord Alresford standing so close behind Mildred that he could scarcely fail to have heard her last observation. She glanced again at her, and beheld her occupied as ever with the colonel, totally unconscious of the eyes so earnestly bent upon her. Helen arose, and moved towards a table, hoping thus to attract her attention, and took up one of those small, highly-coloured engravings of Swiss scenery, so frequently brought home by tourists for the edification of their untravelled friends.

"This coarsely executed print, Miss Campbell, can give you but a very feeble conception of the sublime beauty of Grindelwald," said Lord Alresford, crossing over to the table near which she stood.

Helen was astonished. She stole a glance at the earl's face; the expression of his eye was severe, yet a smile hung on his lip, and she marvelled at the *insouciance* and self-possession of his language and manner.

"Yes; I feel that the stupendous scenery of Switzerland must be seen to be appreciated," replied she, scarcely knowing what she said, as Lord Alresford took the print from her hands.

"The superfluous waters of the lake on the summit of Grindelwald, flowing down the mountain from this glacier,—stupendous peaks of glistening ice, piled one above another some thirty or forty feet high: I can scarcely describe the dazzling effect of the sun's rays, or the gorgeous hues which sparkle around the towering pyramids as they gradually decrease, and slope to the fertile valley at the base of the mountain. But have you never been abroad, Miss Campbell?"

"Never."

"Ah, I suppose you have been too happy—too content with home and its endearing ties to wander in search of foreign adventure." Lord Alresford paused, and then resumed after a brief space. "My Swiss tour furnishes me with more pleasing reminiscences than any of my past years of travel, enhanced as it was by the companionship of Lord Willingham and his accomplished daughter the Lady Catherine Neville."

"Lady Catherine excels in painting and modelling, I understand."

"Yes; her pictures are beautifully finished. She studies daily from a small, but choice gallery of paintings, bequeathed by her father at Wardour. Miss Effingham likewise possesses great talents in this delightful accomplishment, does she not?"

"Have you really never seen any of Mildred's exquisite drawings? I will request her permission to show you her portfolio:—or, perhaps, I had better ask Lady Elvaston," replied Helen, quickly looking round; for she was growing jealous for Mildred's sake.

Lord Alresford made a hasty movement. Helen had not time to ascertain whether it was one of approval or dissent, when dinner was announced; and in a few seconds she found herself traversing the spacious hall, arm in arm with Mr. Northcote, the worthy Rector of Greysdon.

"I do not know what your opinion is, Miss Campbell, but I think our affianced appear the reverse of enchanted with each other this evening," said Mr. Northcote, laughingly, in a whisper.

"Mildred is indisposed," replied Helen, evasively.

"Indeed! I protest I never remember seeing her look more blooming than she appears to-night. Between ourselves, Miss Campbell, as a friend of the Elvastons, I regret that chattering blockhead, Sutherland, makes one of our party."

"Hush!" exclaimed Helen, in a voice of entreaty, as they entered the dining-room.

"But how comes it I have the honour of handing down so fair a damsel?" said the worthy rector, as they took their seats at table. "Let me see how Lady Elvaston has disposed of her beaux. I perceive Sir Richard Tennyson has led out my little friend Mildred," continued Mr. Northcote, in a low tone of voice, meant expressly for Helen's ear, "and Sutherland sits next to Clara Tennyson. Humph! they are well matched, and may lead each other a hot chase which shall talk the longest string of nonsense during the hour they are compelled to play the agreeable. Sir Gerard is trying to make out from little simpering Miss Vincent, whether she will eat fish or sip soup; and yonder sits Lord Alresford by the side of our

graceful hostess, talking with the utmost vivacity. I am not sure, Helen, which he admires most — the mother, or the daughter. But what will you take?" exclaimed Mr. Northcote; his soliloquy being suddenly brought to a close by a servant placing a plate of fish before him.

"I have finished my soup whilst you have been entertaining me with your observations," replied Helen, laughingly.

Mr. Northcote continued for some minutes silently to make up for lost time, and Helen, having nothing to divert her attention, leisurely surveyed the party. Her eye first rested on Mildred. She was reclining back in her chair, and her air and manner bespoke haughty indifference, as she replied to Sir Richard Tennyson's voluble speeches by cold monosyllables: her soft cheek glowed, and there was a restless glitter in her eye, so very opposite to her usual self-possessed demeanour, that Helen was amazed. Mildred's glance frequently rested on Colonel Sutherland and Miss Tennyson; who appeared resolved to realise the rector's good-humoured badinage, and were talking as if their very existence depended on the present moment; and then it flitted again from them and centred on Lord Alresford: once their eyes met; Mildred's cheek glowed more vividly still, but she immediately turned her head away, and made some short remark to the baronet. Helen saw the effort this struggle for self-command cost her, and was right glad when, after another tedious half hour at dessert, Lady Elvaston arose, and with her lady guests retired.

Miss Effingham, however, on quitting the dining-room seemed resolved not to interchange a word with her friend; but linking her arm through Miss Vincent's proceeded towards the conservatory.

"How delightfully cool and refreshing this place is! I do so detest dinner-parties!" exclaimed she, almost pettishly, stooping to inhale the fragrance of a magnificent Cape jessamine.

"Do you? I think it all depends upon one's neighbours," replied Miss Vincent, slightly colouring.

"I hope yours this evening proved themselves agreeable?" asked Mildred quickly, fixing her large earnest eyes on Miss Vincent's face.

"Oh, yes; Colonel Sutherland always contrives to make himself agreeable. But do you know I really felt for him to-day, for we all know how much he admires you, Mildred."

"Does he? Perhaps he admires the Priory entertainments as much, or more."

"Possibly; men of the present age are so insincere. Did you ever hear the strange report, that Colonel Sutherland is

engaged to marry one of the Miss Conways? I do not hesitate to repeat this now to you, Mildred, as of course your flirtation with him never could have been serious."

Miss Effingham's brow flushed.

"Colonel Sutherland could scarcely have been so long in this neighbourhood, partaking of our hospitality, without avowing an engagement every way so honourable to him as one with Lord Normanton's sister," replied she after a momentary pause.

"Nay," rejoined Miss Vincent, shaking her little ringleted head, "we were none of us so violently *éprise* as to render this step absolutely necessary. But what a fine, noble looking man the Earl of Alresford is. You must suffer me to congratulate you, Mildred. Amesbury park is such a magnificent old place, likewise. Aunt Wedderbourne went over the gardens last year, on her return from Hastings, and she says, in her opinion, Windsor Castle could scarcely compete with it. Ah, Mildred! you will throw us all aside with your wreath of orange-flowers to bind a countess's coronet on your brow. What a splendid *avenir* is opening for you!"

"Very," exclaimed Mildred, turning away her head to hide the tears which gathered in her eyes.

"By-the-bye, don't you think this brilliant yellow acacia would make lovely festoons for the boudoir at Dornton on the night of our ball? I must persuade aunt to adopt it," cried Miss Vincent, pausing, and affectedly gathering a few tufts from the clusters of flowers spreading like a sheet of amber over the prickly foliage. "Is Lord Alresford habitually so grave and haughty in his manner, Mildred? I am certain I never should find courage to gainsay or contradict him in the slightest matter: but you have a more daring spirit than I am possessed of. Apropos, I want to ask you who a Lady Catherine Neville is, whom his lordship talked so much about at dinner with Lady Elvaston? He seemed most enthusiastic in her praise. Did you ever hear of her?"

"Certainly. Lady Catherine is the only child of the late Lord Willingham, and a ward of the earl's," replied Mildred, hurriedly. "But here come Helen and Miss Tennyson, so we will take possession of this low couch, and you must tell us all about the preparations for your aunt's ball; who have received, invitations: in short, every particular," exclaimed she, drawing the couch to the inner door of the conservatory, so as to command a view all over the drawing-room. "I fear, Caroline, you will feel a draught from that open window. Had I not better close it?"

"Pray do not for me. The evening breeze is most delicious, wafting towards us the odour of these fragrant parterres!" exclaimed Miss Vincent, affectedly. "How beautifully Aglaë

makes Miss Effingham's dresses!" added she, turning to Helen, as Mildred, heedless of her disclaimer, quietly proceeded to close the slide.

The cords of the pulley appeared, however, entangled; for Mildred, after trying vainly for a few moments, eagerly beckoned to Helen.

Miss Campbell was at her side instantly.

"Helen," whispered she, while her lip quivered, "if you love me, talk to those girls and let them leave me in peace!" and Mildred hastily closed the window, and took a seat on the sofa between Miss Tennyson and Miss Vincent.

In Miss Tennyson, the latter found a very attentive auditor to her elaborate detail of the preparations for the much-talked-of ball. Miss Vincent was one of those young ladies who would consider existence a blank, and their colloquial powers at a very low ebb, but for the occasional excitement of some such stirring event. It was, nevertheless, perfectly wonderful to hear Miss Vincent descant on the colour of a ribbon, or the shape of a pin-cushion; and the copiousness of her expletives on the interesting subject challenged a tribute to her ingenuity, if not to her persuasive powers. In a word, her mornings were wasted in frivolous trifles, which she put forth her best eloquence to prove the contrary, and her evenings in sentimental languishing; which she fancied gave signal proof of intellectual superiority. Her person corresponded with her character: her stature was low, and her complexion of that statue-like, sickly whiteness, which always conveys the impression of failing health; her eyes were large, long, and of pale blue colour,—cold, and unmeaning in their expression, yet pronounced pretty by those who care only for shape and regularity of feature. There was no warmth in her smile, no soul in her face: her small, well cut lips revelled not in richness of hue, and when drawn tightly together, as was frequently the case, imparted an aspect of listless discontent to her features: the only expression of which they seemed capable. Her hair was the sole natural ornament Miss Vincent might fearlessly claim: it floated round her face in a profusion of luxuriant ringlets of that pale golden colour so very uncommon; but we are compelled to confess, that although nature had thus adorned her with tresses of a hue which generally harmonises so well with the fresh blooming tints of youth, yet in Miss Vincent they enhanced alone the colourless insipidity of her countenance.

As Miss Vincent proceeded in her narrative, Helen occasionally threw in a few words; but Mildred, under pretence of a violent headache, sat back and said nothing. Many significant glances passed between the two young ladies, and their conversation began rapidly to subside; but at length the

drawing-room door opened and the gentlemen entered. Mildred started up, and passing into the room, commenced a most animated attack upon poor old Lady Tennyson ; who, for lack of some such impetus, had been composing herself gradually down into a comfortable dose : for Lady Elvaston, during this eventful evening, was too preoccupied to entertain her guests with her wonted vivacity. Lord Alresford quietly continued his conversation with Mr. Northcote, and did not even turn his eyes as Mildred's graceful figure floated by.

"I am sorry, ladies, to be obliged to announce the defection of one of our cavaliers," said Lord Elvaston. "Colonel Sutherland is obliged to return early to prepare a report for the Commissioners, who are coming down to investigate a charge at the barracks to-morrow."

"What ! has Sutherland got into a scrape ?" asked Sir Richard Tennyson.

"Something of the kind : but I don't know the particulars. However, he takes it marvellously easy, so I suppose 'tis nothing very serious," replied Lord Elvaston carelessly, setting down his coffee cup on the table.

"The inquiry is into the conduct of young Blakesley ; nothing at all affecting Colonel Sutherland," interposed Lady Tennyson, now fairly awake. "By-the-bye, Miss Effingham," continued she, rather maliciously, "Dick hears the regiment is ordered from Stanmore to some horrid place in the north. The colonel is such a universal favourite, that I am sure there are many ladies, both old and young, in this neighbourhood who will wear the willow on his departure. Do you not think so ?"

Mildred's beautiful brow slightly contracted.

"Colonel Sutherland is good-natured and lively, therefore we shall all be sorry to lose his society ; though of course you will especially feel it, Lady Tennyson, as he is so frequent a guest at Settringham," hastily interposed Lady Elvaston : for at a glance she discovered that Lord Alresford, though now seemingly occupied with a volume of engravings, attentively watched Mildred's deportment.

"Yes," rejoined Lady Tennyson ; "Dick has taken a monstrous fancy to the colonel, and is always inviting him to Settringham, much oftener than I or Clara approve. My daughter always declares the colonel to be a strange compound of folly and affectation, and I perfectly agree with her."

This was more than Mildred could stand.

"You do, indeed, astonish me, Lady Tennyson," rejoined she with a touch of petulance in her tone and manner ; "and though of course I am far from claiming a discernment profound as Miss Tennyson's, I must confess I have always found Colonel Sutherland most entertaining and agreeable."

Lady Tennyson thought the tone of this retort rather peremptory ; but, as Mildred was a countess elect, she made no reply.

"Do you think Clara would favour us with one of her songs?" asked Mildred, after a short pause, in her usual sweet, gracious tones. "I think I see her music yonder—would your lordship be kind enough to give it to me?" added she addressing Lord Alresford.

The earl silently laid it before her.

"What a very handsome, distinguished-looking man Lord Alresford is! My dear, I beg to congratulate you on your conquest," whispered Lady Tennyson, loud enough for the earl to catch distinctly every syllable she uttered.

Sir Gerard Baynton, meanwhile, made his way to Helen's side.

"Well, Miss Campbell, I must protest that your greeting of an old friend and acquaintance is excessively cool and distant," said he, seating himself by her. "Let me see, 'tis twelve years since we met; but then we were capital friends. and I think our last notable exploit together at Weldon, lured by a tempting field of blooming cowslips, was to wade across the little rivulet at the bottom of the park. Do you remember those happy old days?"

"Oh, yes; and this, and a great many other mischievous exploits likewise," cried Helen laughing and blushing.

"Imagine, then, my disappointment, on returning from Eton again at the holidays, to find my little playfellow flown; and I never hear more of her until after the lapse of a dozen years—when, on a visit to Lord Elvaston, the door suddenly opens, and I am introduced to a very demure, serious young lady, who turns out to be my former faithful ally Helen Campbell, but who now will scarcely acknowledge me."

"Really, Sir Gerard, your case is most pitiable."

"When Lady Elvaston assured me of your identity, I felt most aggrieved. But how is Mrs. Campbell? I have a vivid recollection of her good-natured indulgence of the freaks of a wild schoolboy."

"Mamma is quite well, I thank you."

"And Mr. Campbell, and Archibald? I certainly intend to go and renew my acquaintance with them all to-morrow; but I hear you have now several more brothers and sisters."

"Only another brother and sister—Colin and Henrietta. Mamma often speaks of Lady Emily Baynton. I hope she is well?"

"My mother? Yes, I am thankful to say, she is quite well. She is still residing at the Chauntry: for you know, Miss Campbell, for some years past I have been an inveterate wanderer; and although I fear she must often find it very

lonely, yet I am selfish enough to implore her to remain. I could not endure the thought of the place being deserted or neglected."

"Indeed, I do not wonder. I remember, child as I was, when we removed from Weldon, the vision of its lawns and magnificent woods haunted me long afterwards, contrasted with the very flat, ugly country in which our new abode was situated."

"I trust we shall soon see you again in our neighbourhood, for Amesbury Park is only about three miles from the Chauntry. When Lady Alresford is installed there, we shall have most abundant material for forming a delightful society. I do not think she will complain of being dull when she comes to reside amongst us; for all absent people, in dutiful consideration, are returning to their homes. The famous Vernon suit has terminated in Turville's favour, and he is coming to take immediate possession of Nethercote. Lady Normanton and her daughters live at Moreton Place. Do you remember the Conways, Miss Campbell?"

"I have a slight, though very slight, recollection of having seen them at the Chauntry, at one of Lady Emily's juvenile fêtes."

"They are very near neighbours of ours, and Miss Conway is an especial favourite of my mother's. Poor girl! I fear she has not a very happy home."

"I have always understood that Lady Normanton has a capricious and violent temper."

"Yes; and poor Maude, because she is amiable, and has a most angelic disposition, bears all the burden of her ladyship's ill-humour. Her sister Isabella is beautiful, unfeeling; and, as I have watched her closely, I do not think I should be using too strong a term were I to add *méchante* also."

"You are severe, Sir Gerard. I shall begin to be quite afraid of you," cried Helen, playfully holding up her fan. "Now, seriously—I want to ask you a question: Did you ever hear it reported that Miss Conway is engaged to marry Colonel Sutherland?"

"Now you mention it, I certainly have heard such a report; but I should think it utterly impossible, from what I know of Maude Conway's character, that she could so honour the personage we have met here to-day. There are several totally distinct families which bear the name of Sutherland."

"You think so?"

Helen, nevertheless, still persisted in her secret belief that Colonel Sutherland was Miss Conway's fiancé. She next turned to a subject which gave her as much anxiety as the colonel's engagement.

"You have not mentioned the Lady Catherine Neville. Does she not reside somewhere in your neighbourhood?"

"Yes, at Wardour Court, a fine old mansion five miles from Amesbury."

"Lady Catherine, I understand, has just returned from a long residence abroad. Of course, being Lord Alresford's ward, she must be a friend of yours, Sir Gerard; therefore, pray include her in your sketch of Mildred's future neighbours."

"You are curious, Miss Campbell, I suppose, because she is Alresford's ward," replied Sir Gerard, laughing; "but I assure you she bears most reverential respect to her guardian; for 'tis impossible to be intimately acquainted with Alresford without feeling one's own inferiority in most things. Lady Catherine is beautiful, accomplished, and I have seen few women equally graceful and fascinating. Perhaps you know she is an orphan. Lord Willingham died a few months ago, and left her heiress of his immense estates. Wardour Court, as you will ere long acknowledge, is just the sort of place, with its dark woods, quaint gables, and Gothic windows, for a being of Lady Catherine's enthusiastic temperament to inhabit."

"You have now effectually excited my interest and curiosity, Sir Gerard. Tell me what are her pursuits? Does she visit a great deal?"

"The Conways are her chief friends; though I cannot fancy much congeniality between them—Maude Conway excepted. She often visits my mother; but she has never recovered the shock of Lord Willingham's death, and I understand at times her spirits are so depressed as to occasion great anxiety to Alresford, and indeed to all her friends. But really, Miss Campbell, you have lured me step by step, until I am becoming quite scandalous."

Helen longed to inquire a little more into Lady Catherine's history, and especially on her relations with the earl. She sat meditating upon what she had heard, until Sir Gerard drew her attention to Mildred, who was flitting from one young lady to another, in the hope of gaining a recruit for the piano; Miss Tennyson having obligingly exhausted her supply of songs.

"How beautiful Miss Effingham is!—but how restless and excited she appears to-night!" exclaimed Sir Gerard. "I perceive, or rather suspect, that Alresford and she do not quite understand each other yet. See, he is asking her to sing, which she declines with the air of an empress. By-the-bye, I have discovered perversity is a very prominent trait in Miss Effingham's character. Am I not right, Miss Campbell?"

"No, indeed, Sir Gerard. Mildred is hasty and petulant, I

grant, though never wilfully perverse," rejoined Helen, warmly.

"Nay, then, what do you call this?" cried Sir Gerard, laughing, as Mildred's clear voice sounded through the room, while Sir Richard Tennyson leaned nonchalantly beside her at the piano, and turned the pages of her book.

"I am very, very sorry," exclaimed Helen, rising, and going towards the piano.

At this moment Mr. Campbell's carriage was announced. Miss Effingham hastily ran through the song, whilst Helen took leave of Lady Elvaston, who looked pale and unhappy, but extorted a promise from her, that she would spend the following few days at the Priory. Mildred then took her arm, and they quitted the drawing-room together.

"Now, Helen, not a word! I cannot bear it! I have been mad—insane, to-night. Do not reproach me! But if you care a straw for me, come to-morrow early—as early as you can," exclaimed Mildred, as they ascended the stairs. "Will you come and take pity upon me, Helen?" and Miss Effingham's lip quivered, as she paused before entering her dressing-room, where Aglaë was waiting.

"I will, indeed, Mildred," replied Helen hastily, for tears now poured down Miss Effingham's cheeks. "Go down again, dearest, and make your peace with Lord Alresford. Oh, Mildred, if you do not, how much sorrow this evening's petulance may cost you! Delay not an instant."

"I cannot. I shall not go down stairs again to-night. I am too wretched," and she abruptly entered the room; where, of course, Aglaë's presence prevented further argument.

Helen then affectionately took leave of her, and in a few minutes descended again. At the carriage she found Sir Gerard Baynton talking to her brother.

"So you see, Miss Campbell, I could not resist greeting my old friend, Archibald," said he, as he handed her in. "Make my best compliments to Mrs. Campbell. I shall do myself the honour of waiting upon her to-morrow. You will have a lovely drive through the park. Good-night."

CHAPTER IV.

LORD ALRESFORD'S LETTER.

"WELL, Helen, how do you do this morning? I hope the earl and Sir Gerard Baynton made themselves agreeable last night," exclaimed Colin Campbell, throwing his arms round his sister's neck, to the infinite damage of her snowy little collar, and giving her a hearty kiss as she entered the breakfast-room.

"Excessively so. We had a very large party."

"And I should think a most agreeable one likewise, judging from the time you stayed last night. Why, I sat up to hear how this grand affair went off, until positively my eyes began to close of themselves; so I thought it best to make off. Come, Helen, tell me who Mildred's mysterious knight resembles?"

"I wish, Colin, you would allow your sister to eat her breakfast, instead of listening to your nonsense. Sit down, Helen, my dear; here is your coffee," said Mrs. Campbell.

"And as I am sure also she must be hungry, after the fatigue of sitting up half the night, here is a roll for you to begin upon, Helen: and see, I have gathered you a bunch of violets still sparkling with dewdrops."

"Oh, how kind of you! But, Colin, you are growing quite romantic," cried Helen, laughing, as she fastened the flowers in her brooch.

"But it would have been more romantic had Sir Gerard brought them. Ah, Helen, I do not despair."

"I assure you, Colin, your sister found Sir Gerard Baynton very agreeable last night. He certainly paid her great attention, and seemed quite anxious to renew his acquaintance with us."

"Oh, mamma, how your imagination magnifies the trifling conversation I had with Sir Gerard," replied Helen, slightly blushing. "It was so very natural he should be interested in hearing again of so old and kind a friend as yourself."

"Yes; I am sure it will give me great pleasure to see Sir Gerard again, and I trust you expressed as much, my dear. You said, did you not, that he spoke most enthusiastically of Lord Alresford?" rejoined Mrs. Campbell, pouring out the coffee.

"Indeed, he spoke most highly and affectionately of his friend; and, as far as outward appearances go, I never saw a finer or more intellectual face than the earl's."

"Appearances are deceitful, my dear Helen; and I can well

imagine, if Mildred likes, and is silly enough to be entertained by the absurdities of Colonel Sutherland, that she would feel a kind of restraint in the society of such a man as Lord Alresford. For my own part, I always considered his manners too frigid for so young a man. But I wonder where your father and Archibald are? Do, Colin, go out and see if they are anywhere within hail. They generally take themselves off in this provoking way, and then complain that the coffee is cold."

"All right. Here they are, mother!" exclaimed Colin, dropping into his chair again, as Mr. Campbell and his son entered the room.

Helen sprang forwards to embrace her father.

"Well, Helen, I did not expect to see you down so soon this morning. Had you a pleasant party last night?—and how did you like the earl?"

"I cannot tell you, papa, how fascinated I was. To be sure, I had not much conversation with him, and, perhaps, I am forming a hasty judgment; but there is a quiet, high-bred repose and dignity in his manner, which, were I in Mildred's place, I should feel very attractive."

"Yes; he certainly has all this," replied Mr. Campbell, drawing his chair to the table, "and, what is more, a highly cultivated mind also. Lord Alresford, or I am much mistaken, expects to find in the woman he marries a sensible, intelligent companion, and not a frivolous, trifling doll, to be petted by adulation into good humour. But I think Mildred, with her beauty and talent, would suit him admirably, could she get rid of her absurd penchant for Colonel Sutherland. I trust, Helen, she had good sense enough, yesterday evening, to show him that from henceforth all this nonsensical partiality must for ever be cast aside."

"Do not ask me a single word about Mildred's conduct last night," rejoined Helen, earnestly. "All I trust is, that Lord Elvaston will have the good sense never more to invite Colonel Sutherland—at least, if this marriage is to be."

"Which is very doubtful, in my opinion," interposed Mrs. Campbell. "It is quite marvellous how some people will persist in running counter to their good fortune. Mildred's conduct in this affair appears to me deliberate insanity! Here she is sought by a nobleman of princely fortune, handsome, talented, and I suppose attached to her, or he would not put up with her megrims; and all this she is ready to reject for the sake of a chattering popinjay of a Colonel of Dragoons! I should like much to discover what first induced Lord Alresford to engage himself to her. Do you know, Helen?"

"My dear, you must allow Mildred to have her secrets like other people, and if she chooses to confide them to Helen, we

should not ask her to betray what she evidently has no right to do," interposed Mr. Campbell.

"At any rate, Helen, I never saw Mildred look more radiantly beautiful than last night. I was waiting for you in the morning room when you both passed, but talking so earnestly, that neither of you saw me. I suppose it was about the colonel, for Mildred's fair cheek glowed like the flowers in her hair. All I have to say is, that if the earl can long withstand the influence of her sunny smile, he must be made of stone, and, therefore, not worthy to possess her. I wish she had been engaged to Sir Gerard Baynton!" exclaimed Archibald Campbell.

"Mildred will presently come to her senses," observed Mr Campbell; "at present she is prejudiced and—shall I let you into a profound secret?—a little jealous of the Lady Catherine Neville."

"Lady Catherine Neville! What could put such an idea into your head, my dear? Mildred, indeed, would have a formidable rival, if Lady Catherine's beauty is at all comparable to what it was when we left Weldon; for a more lovely, interesting child I never met with. Poor thing! she lived almost the life of a nun in that dismal Wardour Court; her only companion a Mrs. Otway, to whom Lady Willingham, on her death-bed, committed her daughter's education. Lord Willingham shut himself up after his wife's death, and was seen by none—no, not even by his steward—for upwards of two years. I wonder whether Mrs. Otway is still alive, and living at Wardour Court."

"I do not believe Mildred would condescend to be jealous of Lady Catherine Neville, or of anybody else. She must be too conscious of her own worth. 'Tis strange how sometimes the greatest treasures are bestowed on people who do not value them!" exclaimed Archibald.

"Nay, I think there is a great deal of truth in papa's remark. Did you know that Lady Catherine has an aunt married to some Italian nobleman, which perhaps explains her long residence abroad?" asked Helen.

Mr. Campbell was about to reply, but his wife interposing, he smiled, and quietly allowed her to proceed.

"To be sure, Helen. Lady Willingham was a daughter of the late Marquis of Lulworth. Let me see, I think she was the Marquis's second daughter; and Lady Eva, her eldest sister, I am pretty sure, married the Count Pezzaro, a Sicilian nobleman. Then there was Lady Amabel—stay: really, upon consideration, she must have been the eldest, and Lady Beatrice the youngest child. Colin, my dear boy, give me the Peerage. You will find it in the left-hand corner of the bookcase opposite."

"Well, Helen, how did you like Sir Gerard?" asked Archibald Campbell. "Is he not a fine, agreeable fellow?"

Mrs. Campbell momentarily ceased turning over the leaves of the heavy tome before her to listen to her daughter's reply.

"I found him most amusing and lively. He admired dear Mildred excessively."

"And, I should think, is far better suited to her than the earl," rejoined Archibald Campbell.

"Sir Gerard seems to possess a gay *laissez aller* kind of disposition, and if pride does slumber beneath, 'tis not the least bit apparent. Lord Alresford's fault, I should say, is haughty inflexibility of temper. Were I Mildred, I should be proud to have won such a man; but I do not yet know sufficient of his character to say whether I ever could love him."

"So upon the whole I perceive you favour the earl, Helen. What a little fool Mildred must be to behave so badly: that is, if she intends to marry him," said Colin.

"*Quand on est heureux on ne s'y connaît pas; mais quand on est vraiment malheureux on n'est que trop sensible du bonheur passé.* So, I fear only under rude discipline will our friend at length learn wisdom," observed Mr. Campbell. "I think your mother said something last night about your going to stay at the Priory. When do you go, Helen?" added he, after a short pause.

"I promised to go to-day."

"I should have been dreadfully chagrined at this engagement last night, Helen; for Sutherland and myself went to look at the mare you admired so much, when ridden last winter by Miss Tennyson, and I had set my heart on your trying her this morning. However, Burton writes me word his groom has met with a bad accident, and consequently he cannot send her to Greysdon until to-morrow."

"Dear Archy, I really know not how to thank you enough! I feel sure I shall manage her capitally. She is such a beautiful, docile creature," said Helen, with a bright smile.

"Well, Helen, you shall exhibit your horsemanship to-morrow, for Sir Gerard's edification," rejoined Archibald, rising from the breakfast table, and lounging towards the window.

"What's all this, Helen? Are you really going? What a bore!" exclaimed Colin. "I knew the people at the Priory would disturb the quiet of our village."

"I have it! I have found it!" suddenly exclaimed Mrs. Campbell, triumphantly. "I thought I was right. It seems the late Marquis of Lulworth had three daughters, co-heiresses, by his wife Margaretta, daughter of Lord St. Arderne; Lady Amabel, who married Egremont Turville, Esquire, of Baysford Abbey; Lady Eva married to Count Pezzaro; and the Lady

Beatrice, wife of the Right Honourable the Earl of Willingham, mother of the Lady Catherine Neville——”

“I beg pardon, mother, for interrupting you, but here is a gentleman coming across the churchyard towards the house.” Mrs. Campbell started. “He looks very like somebody I have seen before,” continued Archibald, gazing earnestly. “Yes; and I vow ’tis no less a personage than Sir Gerard Baynton. I must go and meet him.”

Mrs. Campbell closed the book immediately; but, spite of her loquacity, she was really too well bred to appear confused or flurried.

“Helen, you are looking rather pale this morning: go nearer the fire, my dear. Sir Gerard must have been very much struck with you, I am sure, to pay us so early a visit.”

“Well, Helen, this is capital!” cried the incorrigible Colin. “Mamma has already settled in her own mind that you are to be Lady Baynton. I trust your ladyship, when you come into possession of your mansion, the Chauntry, will grant me permission to shoot and fish as I will in your woods and lakes, and allow me the run of your stables. Stay! for this latter boon I think I had better remain and be introduced to my brother-in-law elect.”

“Hush, hush, Colin!” exclaimed Mr. Campbell.

“Really, Colin, your tongue will be your ruin,” said Mrs. Campbell, sharply; piqued at having her secret projects so roughly disclosed; “but I must entreat you to reserve your jests for a more convenient season, as it will be hardly agreeable for your sister should they be overheard by Sir Gerard.”

“I would not displease Helen for the world,” began Colin, in more subdued accents, as Sir Gerard Baynton and Archibald Campbell made their appearance.

“Well, Mrs. Campbell,” exclaimed Sir Gerard, advancing and warmly extending his hand, “I cannot express the pleasure it gives me to shake hands again with you, my former kind and indulgent friend. I fear, however, you will think my boyish freaks adhere as closely as ever, in timing my visit at this most unseasonable hour,” added he quickly, glancing at the breakfast table: “but Miss Campbell last night kindly led me to hope I should not be an unwelcome visitor.”

“Indeed, Sir Gerard, this meeting gives me more pleasure than I can express: it recalls the happy days spent at Weldon,” replied Mrs. Campbell, graciously.

Sir Gerard then greeted Mr. Campbell; was introduced to Colin; made friends with Henrietta; talked over the party again with Helen, and finally ensconced himself by Mrs. Campbell’s work-table; and, in her skilful hands, was soon deep in the details of his own individual history, and of that

of almost every personage of her acquaintance in the county of D——shire.

Helen, in the meantime remembering her promise to Mildred, quietly stole out of the room, and commenced the necessary preparations for her visit. When these were completed, having no desire for Sir Gerard's escort to the Priory, she bade farewell to her father, who had retired to his study, and, leaving a message for Mrs. Campbell, set out alone. For some time she walked briskly along, yet, spite of her impatience to be with Mildred, the beauty of the day caused her gradually to slacken her speed.

It was one of those lovely May mornings when the soft, fresh wind blows, laden with the growing fragrance of spring, and the vivid green foliage quivers and sparkles, as the bright sunbeams dart and flit amid its transparent intricacies. In the distance, the spires of the churches in the neighbouring town of Stanmore cut clear against the deep azure sky, while behind, stretching in a long undulating line on the far horizon, the summits of the beautiful M——shire hills, softened and dissolved themselves in a flood of radiant, golden haze. Every break in the thick trees skirting the road opened tempting zig-zag paths, chequered with sunshine and shadow; and every now and then a hare or rabbit scudded past, brushing away the sparkling dew-drops in its course, as it plunged into the blue depths of the wood. Helen felt cheered: the bright face of nature, and the harmony which everywhere greeted her, as all around glowed and revelled under the fructifying sun, cast its reflex on her spirits, and made her feel more competent to the task of encouraging and fortifying Mildred's good resolutions.

Again she quickened her pace, and in less than half an hour found herself in the boudoir. Miss Effingham was seated on the sofa, her elbow leaning on the table, her head resting on her hand. She wore a loose wrapping gown, and her beautiful hair was bound negligently round her head. A tray with her still untouched breakfast stood before her, though it was nearly one o'clock. She started, and hastily turned her head as the door opened: Helen saw that her cheek was very pale and dimmed with tears.

"Dear, dear Helen, you have come at last: I have been counting every second in anxious expectation," cried she, as she arose and flung her arms round Helen's neck, and sobbed convulsively.

"Mildred, what has happened since we parted?" asked Helen, earnestly, alarmed at her excessive agitation. "Have you seen Lord Alresford this morning?"

"No; but I have heard from him," exclaimed Mildred, pointing to an open letter on the sofa; and her tears gushed

forth again. "Helen, I must have been insane yesterday evening!"

"My poor Mildred, had you but listened to my advice—however, this may easily be repaired. Let me summon Lady Elvaston."

"Helen, you mistake me. I never can love Lord Alresford: never, never! therefore, though I may regret the mode in which I suffered my dislike to manifest itself, I cannot repent the impression created. This dreadful engagement will be the bane of my existence. Oh, Helen! parents have no right to hang such grievous burdens on their children. I cannot endure to contemplate the future, and I tremble at the responsibility of becoming the wife of such a man as Alresford:—one whose standard is so high, and who despises me!" said Miss Effingham rapidly.

"This strange fancy seems to haunt you; though I am convinced it is a groundless one, and now I am able to say so from personal observation, Mildred. Who can have insinuated such doubts into your mind? Is it Colonel Sutherland?" asked Helen, boldly, resolved to probe to the very bottom of the wound.

"Sutherland has scarcely ever breathed Lord Alresford's name."

"Really! when the whole county has been ringing with the report of your engagement to Lord Alresford, yet Colonel Sutherland, whom it most concerned, never took the trouble to ascertain its truth!" rejoined Helen, indignantly.

"Yet, Helen, 'tis nothing but the knowledge of this fatal betrothal which prevents him from declaring himself. I am sure he loves me! Helen, you think me weak, foolish—but you forget that the whole happiness of my life depends on the events of the next few days. Did you not perceive Sutherland's distress last night?" and she fixed her eyes earnestly, almost beseechingly, on Helen's face.

"No, Mildred, I did not discover any such symptom. Bear with me, and suffer me to tell you my real sentiments," continued she, as Mildred turned away. "My firm belief is, that were you this moment free from your engagement, Colonel Sutherland would not ask you to become his wife. He could not—he dare not; for, I am persuaded, he is engaged to Miss Conway!"

"Never will I believe it from any lips but his own. He could not be so base!" exclaimed Mildred, passionately.

"But, Mildred, consider—are you not guilty of the very same outrage towards Lord Alresford?"

"Lord Alresford is devoted heart and soul to Lady Catherine Neville."

"Have you his own warrant for this assertion?"

"Helen, you torture me. Is it not apparent in every word he utters—every line he writes?"

"No," replied Helen, calmly.

"Not, when in this very letter he gives me a week to consider, and decide definitely, whether I intend to become his wife? A touching proof of affection, you must acknowledge, to be prepared to resign me so easily!" Helen gazed at her with amazement as she continued, with flushing cheek,—"Yes; and he affects, moreover, to treat me as capricious, childish—when my ambition is to be loved ardently, entirely, by the man I marry. In short, you may look as incredulous as you will, Helen, I must be loved as Edward Sutherland loves me."

A mournful smile curled Helen's lip.

"But, Mildred, what if you find, as assuredly you will, that Colonel Sutherland, flattered by the notice of the beautiful, wealthy, and betrothed Miss Effingham, suffered himself to be betrayed into professions which—I will not say as a man of honour, for that title, in my opinion, he has long forfeited,—but with a due regard to his reputation, he would not have hazarded, could he have guessed the unsettled state of your affections."

"I shall say, if falsehood be permitted thus to mar the fairest portions of one's life, there is nothing worth living for in this world," said Mildred despondingly, covering her face with her hands.

"You are exhausted and excited, Mildred. You have not touched a morsel of breakfast. Do allow me to summon Aglaë to fetch some hot coffee, and then, dearest," continued she, with a slight laugh, "we will discuss what course it will be most prudent and politic for you to adopt."

"No, do not ring for Aglaë. I cannot bear to see anyone at present. I will eat some of this," replied Mildred, languidly pulling a plate towards her. "That story, Helen, about Miss Conway, I am persuaded is false. Caroline Vincent hinted something of the kind yesterday. How humiliated I felt that such a little stinging insect had power to annoy me for a moment!"

"But Mrs. Northcote, whom you cannot accuse of fabricating such reports, told me so likewise."

"Ah, when once a scandal is current, it runs through the entire neighbourhood; and I dare say good, simple Mrs. Northcote heard, and believes it profoundly. But, Helen, set your mind at rest; after the probationary week so condescendingly allotted by his lordship has expired, it is my firm resolve to confirm my engagement, and become in due time Countess of Alresford," said Mildred, with a bitter smile.

"Oh, Mildred! surely, surely not in your present frame of mind, and with your sentiments,"

"Yes, Helen, for mamma's sake, I shall tear from my mind every remembrance of the past, and resign myself to my destiny. I cannot tell you how her behaviour affected me last night. I could have worshipped her! She came to see me after you left; and, though I know my conduct must have made her miserable,—must have struck a dagger to her heart, not a reproach did she utter. She kissed me as tenderly as ever—though, Helen, before the earl's arrival yesterday we had a long conversation together; and then, when I implored her to tell me whether, in the event of this marriage going off, papa would accept of Lord Alresford's renunciation of the property, should he generously urge it, after trying to evade my question for some time, she reluctantly replied in the negative; adding, that if my marriage did not annul the obligation, nothing could induce papa to alter his determination."

"Then, Mildred, what could possess you to behave so imprudently? Forgive me, if I speak plainly; but Mildred, I implore you, act honourably—be yourself again! Summon Lord Alresford immediately—his opinion ought to be more to you than the applause of the whole world—and seek a reconciliation," exclaimed Helen, earnestly; tears trembling in her soft eyes as she laid her hand on Mildred's arm.

"No, Helen; 'tis not for me to shorten the probation his lordship chooses to impose. No! these days shall be spent in schooling myself for my future destiny: a yoke not to be lightly undertaken; as you will confess, after you have read the earl's letter," continued she, with a slight nervous laugh. "Besides, from Colonel Sutherland's own lips will I learn the truth, or falsehood, of his reported engagement."

"Of what use will this inquiry be?—Dear, dear Mildred! I beseech you, peril not again your good resolutions!"

"Use! nay, surely, Helen, it will serve me as a good and most convincing moral lesson, if true. Now read the stern admonition of my future *caro sposo*," and she put the letter into Helen's hand. "Stay, first tell me your opinion of the earl—mind, your real opinion."

"My opinion will be soon told. I think Lord Alresford one of the most fascinating and intellectual persons I have ever seen; and, Mildred, it seems to me, he is a man to whom any woman might speedily become passionately attached."

"Yes, but he must love her first, and show it also. There is a kind of cool indifference in his manner, which to me is absolutely daunting. Oh, Helen! you are just the very wife to have suited him, with your calm, clear judgment, and self-possession. I wish he had chosen you. But read the letter, dearest."

Miss Effingham threw herself back on the sofa. Helen drew the note from its envelope; its purport was as follows:—

"I conclude, after the events of yesterday evening, it will not afford you much surprise to receive this early communication from me. I write not, Miss Effingham, however, to reproach you; for if your good feeling and delicacy have not already convinced you of the impropriety, and (pardon me if I add) levity, of your past conduct, any argument I could use must be powerless, though, probably, as you are well aware of my sentiments on most subjects, the expression of my unqualified disapproval will be only what you anticipated. 'Tis true, our inclinations are not at our command: God forbid that I should seek to constrain yours; but our duty is always clear, and though I am disposed to make every allowance for thoughtless caprice, I cannot submit to be trifled with, nor will I permit the woman publicly pledged to me to render herself notorious. Your conscience, Mildred, must testify, by my forbearance under past and grievous provocation, that I seek you not from motives of expediency; and that these sentiments are still dominant, I trust I may be able to prove to you. Despite, therefore, your cold, nay—I was about to write, insulting reception, after an absence of two years, I will not lightly yield the hand pledged to me. Take time to consider: reflect dispassionately; and if, at the conclusion of one week from the present period, you tell me you could be happier with another—you are free! During this time I will so far constrain myself as to remain your father's guest. Should you decide on confirming our engagement, I will not conceal from you that I expect, and shall require, my promised wife to conform in all essentials to those sentiments and opinions she has so frequently heard me express. If, on the contrary, you decide on the rupture of our engagement, I need scarcely assure you that I will assume the whole responsibility, and break the matter to Lord Elvaston.

"Believe me yours, very faithfully,

"ALRESFORD."

"Well, Helen, what do you say to this? His lordship, you will agree, is not sparing of his censure. I acknowledge I deserve all, and everything he says: yet such rebukes, though they doubtless convict, seldom propitiate," said Mildred, her beautiful lip curling with anger.

"It is severe, I allow; and evidently written under the influence of wounded feeling. But Mildred, a stranger, totally unacquainted with your principles, would consider this result as the very thing you were aiming at last night,—to disgust Lord Alresford, and incite him to release you from your promise."

"This from you, Helen!" exclaimed Mildred, reddening.

"Mildred, suppose the earl overheard, as I did, your conversation with Colonel Sutherland?"

Miss Effingham started.

"No, Helen ; I will not suppose such a thing. He could then never forgive me," cried she shuddering. "How rash I must have been, knowing my future fate was in his hands ! Oh ! why did he ever go to Italy ? Now, Helen, give me your advice ; what shall I do ?"

"Why, I have already told you," replied Helen, smiling. "If you intend to marry Lord Alresford, it would be far more amiable and gracious to terminate his suspense at once, and beg him to forget that he ever saw you to so little advantage as yesterday evening. I regretted very much, when I heard from Aglaë you were too unwell to receive his lordship. How did it happen, Mildred ?"

"I was too much overpowered with my conversation with dear mamma ; and when the earl arrived, to tell you the truth, I was indulging in a hearty good fit of crying."

"But afterwards ?"

"Well, afterwards, mamma came to fetch me, and I had an interview of a few minutes with the earl in her dressing-room ; and then we went down into the drawing-room together," replied Miss Effingham, evasively.

"But was not Lord Alresford's greeting kind ?"

"How curious you are, Helen ! Oh, yes ! very. I believe he kissed my cheek, and said something about his happiness in being with me again ; or a speech to that purport : but I forget."

"And what did you say, Mildred ?"

"Really, Helen, I cannot bind myself to repeat correctly every word that passed. I think I thanked his lordship very properly for the compliment," replied Miss Effingham, with affected nonchalance, twisting the tassels of the cord which confined her robe-de-chambre.

"What ! Was this all ?"

"All ! What would you have more ?" She stopped and coloured, as she caught Helen's eye. "No ; I will not aggravate my omissions by this trifling. I confess I did not receive Lord Alresford as he had a right to expect. But Helen, dear, leave me awhile now, for I think I had better finish my toilette and go down to lunch ; and then you shall see I will demean myself so beautifully that the earl shall be filled with amazement at the success of his eloquence," said she, with a faint laugh. "Come, let me first show you your room. Among my many blessings, Helen, I am sure I ought to thank God for giving me a dear, kind, sincere friend like yourself," said Miss Effingham, as she linked her arm through Helen's, and they proceeded together down the gallery.

"You see you are not a very great way from me ; but, Helen, as soon as you can, pray go down and cheer dear

mamma," exclaimed Mildred, as she threw open the door of a pretty, cheerful room, with a snowy toilette, and curtains and hangings of bright, flowery chintz.

"I will go down stairs immediately."

"Then, Helen, you advise me to send no written reply to the earl's charming billet?" said Mildred, unclosing the door again, and half entering the room.

"No; far better let Lord Alresford read his answer in your altered demeanour. You will soon come down, Mildred, won't you?"

Miss Effingham nodded her pretty little head sagaciously, and vanished.

CHAPTER V.

ARRANGING A PICNIC.

HELEN had been sitting alone with Lady Elvaston about half an hour when Mildred came down, looking worn and languid from mental agitation and a sleepless night.

Lady Elvaston gazed anxiously in her daughter's face, and her eyes followed her with a pained thoughtful expression, as Mildred restlessly made the circuit of the room, and then pausing at the window, looked long and steadily without. She started at the sound of a step in the adjoining room, and, half turning round, glanced uneasily at the door.

"Sir Gerard went soon after breakfast to call upon Mrs. Campbell, and, I suppose, is gone off on some expedition with Archibald; and Lord Alresford has accompanied your father to Stanmore," hastily said Lady Elvaston, following her daughter's glance.

Mildred breathed a deep sigh of relief, and threw herself on a stool at her mother's feet.

"Helen, what a beautiful cushion you are working. I never saw anything more glowing than these roses. You must finish it for me; and when I sit in my drawing-room at Amesbury, I shall gaze at it and think of all the dear ones I have left behind at Greysdon," exclaimed Mildred, tears springing to her eyes.

"Nay, Mildred, I fear the frequency of our visits will afford you very brief intervals for such reminiscences," replied Lady Elvaston, cheerfully.

"As we three are left to our own devices this afternoon,

what shall we do, mamma?" said Mildred with a sigh, putting back the canvas on Helen's knee.

"It is now a quarter past two o'clock," replied Lady Elvaston, glancing at the pendule. "I thought we would either drive out, or walk, whichever you felt most inclined to do."

"A drive, then. The air I think will do me good. Let us order the carriage at three, mamma, please."

The bell was accordingly rung, the carriage ordered, and then the three ladies, somewhat *tristement*, sat down to lunch. They had scarcely commenced, when the sound of carriage-wheels on the gravel without brought a flush to Mildred's cheeks.

"Our visitors most probably are the Farnleighs. I have been expecting them for some days past," said Lady Elvaston.

"No; it is the Tennysons' carriage, I am sure," exclaimed Helen Campbell, as a dashing, smart-blue britzska and grays whirled past the windows. "I caught a glimpse of Miss Tennyson's pink bonnet and feathers."

"Poor Clara! she always dresses to drive about in the country, as she would for the park in the height of the season. But what can bring her here again? Helen, you must do all the talking for me, for I am not in spirits to cope with her gossip. What a pity Sir Gerard is not at home!"

Miss Tennyson presently entered, and, though too much dressed for a country morning call, looked well; for her figure was commanding, and, conscious of her want of taste, she had the good sense to defer the selection of her toilette to her maid; who, she took infinite pains to inform everybody, was a most accomplished artiste.

"Good-morning, Lady Elvaston. I dare say you are surprised to see me again so soon. Mildred, I hope your headache is well this morning? I pitied you so much last night. Is it quite gone? for you look rather *abimée*. How do you do, Miss Campbell?" exclaimed Miss Tennyson, in her usual thoughtless manner.

"We are all tolerably well, thank you," said Lady Elvaston, replying for the party. "I trust Lady Tennyson was not fatigued last night?"

"Oh, dear, no, not in the least. She is gone with Sir Richard to drive in his new phaeton this afternoon: a terribly imprudent thing; for Dick has changed his horses, and I am sure it will be a marvellous piece of luck, if they both come home without broken bones."

"I hope nothing so shocking will happen. Have you lunched, Clara, or will you take some with us?"

"Thank you, I shall be most happy. What a charming party we make! It is sometimes so pleasant to get rid of the

gentlemen ; one then can talk at ease, without the slightest restraint : but, Mildred, I must confess I scarcely hoped for this gratification at the Priory to-day."

"Sir Gerard Baynton is gone, I believe, to walk or ride with Mr. Archibald Campbell," replied Miss Effingham, coldly.

"Indeed ! I was not aware, until last night, Sir Gerard was an acquaintance of yours, Miss Campbell."

"Perhaps you do not know that papa held the curacy of Weldon some years ago. I am very slightly acquainted with Sir Gerard Baynton."

"Really. The Chantry is a fine old place, I understand."

"Very."

"Somebody told me, Lady Emily Baynton resides there, which, if true, I consider a great misfortune for Sir Gerard ; for whenever mothers live with their sons, or maiden sisters with their brothers, the men are sure to draggle on existence old bachelors."

"I wish Sir Gerard Baynton was here, Clara, instead of roaming no one knows where with Archibald Campbell, unconscious of your anxious solicitude for his welfare," exclaimed Mildred, laughing.

"Nay, it is universally acknowledged, that widowed mothers, and maiden sisters, have prevented more matches than any other people in the world. I appeal to Lady Elvaston."

"Have they ? Indeed, Clara, I am not prepared to make so very sweeping an admission. May I give you a little more pâté ?"

"Not any more, I thank you. It is all very ingenious of you, Mildred, to turn the conversation so cleverly ; but you know well, Sir Gerard was not the personage I alluded to just now."

"Lord Alresford is gone with Lord Elvaston to Stanmore, if it be to him you allude," said Lady Elvaston, thinking it best to put an end at once to Miss Tennyson's innuendoes.

"Indeed ! mamma and Dick will probably meet them : that is, if these latter are not upset before they reach Stanmore. Seriously, Mildred, I never saw anyone so handsome and distinguished-looking as Lord Alresford. He quite eclipses all the gentlemen in this neighbourhood, as I was observing to Dick as we drove home last night. No one can wonder at your preferring him, after all, to Colonel Sutherland."

Mildred writhed, and the blood suffused her temples.

"If you have quite finished, Clara, we will go to the drawing-room, if you please," said Lady Elvaston, rising hastily.

"Certainly. I want to speak with you, Mildred," cried Miss Tennyson, seizing Miss Effingham's reluctant hand, and drawing it under her arm. "I was as near as possible forgetting the object of my visit. Colonel Sutherland called very early

this morning at Settringham, and said something about an excursion to Fernly Abbey, which you and he had not time fully to arrange yesterday evening. Mamma thought it such a charming project, that we agreed to form a party there the day after to-morrow, and I came to ask whether you and all your friends would join us. It is to be an equestrian pilgrimage; and Sutherland seemed so very anxious, that I almost took upon myself to promise your acquiescence."

Mildred's cheek became pale, and then flushed, and she studiously avoided her mother's or Helen's glance.

"I am quite astonished to hear you advocate a plan of Colonel Sutherland's, Clara. I understood he was most unpopular at Settringham, with all save Sir Richard," replied she, with an effort.

"Did you? Who could possibly have put such an idea into your head?"

"My authority was Lady Tennyson herself."

"Very likely. Mamma does sometimes make the oddest assertions: *c'est sa façon*, and so I let them pass uncontradicted: or, perhaps, she was just recovering from her doze! Will you come?"

"I think, Miss Tennyson, you must not urge Mildred; she has been far from well during these few days past, and the exertion and excitement will be too much," said Helen, gently.

"My dear Mildred, you surely will not think of going," exclaimed Lady Elvaston, anxiously, alarmed at her daughter's silence.

"*Ah, le bonheur opprime quelquefois plus que le malheur*, as Pascal, or Molière, or some other great French moralist, remarks," observed Miss Tennyson, archly. "But surely, dear Mildred, you will not suffer this to deprive us of the pleasure of your company on Friday?"

"My dear child——"

"Excuse me, mamma, it would be a great disappointment to me to miss this party; therefore, if you have no objection, I will accept Clara's invitation."

"You must please yourself, Mildred," replied Lady Elvaston, coldly.

"Oh, charming! Then I shall make quite sure of you, Mildred, and we will call for you *en route*—mind and bring Lord Alresford and Sir Gerard. May we also hope to see you, Miss Campbell?"

Helen hesitated.

"Helen, you must go, if it be only to try your new horse."

"So Dick tells me, Miss Campbell, your brother has bought the mare I rode last autumn. She is a splendid creature, and will carry you admirably. Her only defect is, that she is

rather hard in the mouth, and therefore difficult to check. Will you not join our Fernly expedition?"

"I cannot quite promise. If you will permit me to accept the invitation conditionally, I shall be most happy so to do," said Helen; resolved to say neither yes, nor no, but to decide when the day arrived what would be most expedient for her to do.

"Oh, certainly, Miss Campbell. I trust the day may be clear, then we shall enjoy the fine view from the hill behind the Abbey. Apropos, I have been this morning to pay an early visit to Mrs. Wedderbourne, who wanted to consult me on the choice of decorations for the supper-room. Her ball will really be quite a splendid affair; Jullien's band, a supper from Gunter's, the choicest flowers; and, above all, the old nabob Judge's magnificent gold epergne and vases, we have all heard so much about, are to be taken from the mysterious cases in which they arrived from Calcutta, and employed to decorate the principal table."

"Good, fussy Mrs. Wedderbourne should receive her guests under a canopy of silver damask, to make the scene complete. It would be kind in you, Clara, to hint this to her," said Mildred, superciliously.

"Ah, I know you are quizzing me now: but I must positively depart. May I ring for the carriage, Lady Elvaston?"

Never was permission more gladly given.

"Caroline Vincent talked of connecting their conservatory with the camellia house, and lighting them both with coloured lamps; but I quite put my veto on that project. I always consider it a great mistake to intermingle coloured light with flowers: it entirely spoils their hues—don't you think so, Miss Campbell?"

"I dare say it does," replied Helen, without raising her eyes from her work; "but——"

"I know we all thought so at Settringham, when mamma gave her grand fête in honour of Dick's coming of age. Then, decidedly, Mildred, we shall see you on Friday: we must make the most of you during the short period you remain amongst us. I shall like of all things, however, to be at your wedding, and then, afterwards, pay you a visit at Amesbury."

Miss Effingham glanced at Helen, amused at the very supposition of Lord Alresford being called upon to act the host to, and entertain a being so frivolous and loquacious.

"Of course, Clara, Mildred would be much concerned not to see you amongst her other friends at her wedding," said Lady Elvaston.

"Indeed, I trust so. Here comes the carriage, so now, adieu!" cried Miss Tennyson, starting from her chair. "We shall call for you about twelve on Friday, Mildred, and

mamma intends to take a dejeuner to spread on the grass under the ruins ; so you will not be alarmed, Lady Elvaston, if we return rather late. Miss Campbell, pray persuade your brothers to join us also : the *coup d'œil*, when we are all gathered together, will be charming, and will remind one of a goodly cavalcade of olden days defiling down the hill to the Abbey gates. Good-bye—pray make my kind remembrances to Lord Elvaston ;” and Miss Tennyson, after shaking hands round, and embracing Mildred, took her departure.

“Poor Clara ! I am almost ashamed to confess how great a relief her absence is. Helen, did you ever listen to such nonsense as her conversation ? Positively, one could only expect to hear the like from an inmate of a *maison de santé* ; and yet, poor girl, she is thoroughly well-meaning and good-natured,” exclaimed Miss Effingham, listlessly.

“Yes ; Clara Tennyson was introduced very early into society, and suffered to take her own course, with a miserable education and unsettled principles. It is lamentable to think Lady Tennyson’s weak, foolish fondness for her children has been productive of such lasting injury to them both,” said Lady Elvaston.

“I pity Clara sincerely, and have repeatedly tried to be of use to her. Some few months ago, I attempted to make her understand and apply the moral of the good Count of Anjou’s rebuke to King Louis of France, when taunted by the monarch for his love of learning, and the arts—‘*Sachez, Sire, qu’un prince non lettré est un âne couronné*,’ though without success. But come, Helen dear, as we shall not improve Clara’s condition by lamenting over her deficiencies, let us go out and walk somewhere, as it is now too late to drive to-day,” exclaimed Mildred, playfully snatching the work from Helen’s hand.

“Mildred,” exclaimed Lady Elvaston, earnestly, “I trust you intend to consult Lord Alresford about this Fernly expedition. I cannot express how uncomfortable it makes me. Be advised, my dear child, and give it up ; you could not go with any propriety without him, and I feel convinced he will decidedly refuse to meet Colonel Sutherland.”

“Mamma,” said Miss Effingham, throwing her arm round her mother’s neck, “you will think me wicked,—perverse ; but, once more, I must see Colonel Sutherland. I am firmly resolved to risk the interview. Do not grieve about it, dearest, dearest mamma ; indeed, this shall be my last act of rebellion. I must satisfy myself on one point, and you know not how much my future fate may depend on its issue. Come, Helen !” and Mildred, without once hazarding a glance in her mother’s face, seized Helen’s arm, and quitted the room.

CHAPTER VI.

TETE-A-TETE.

WHEN Miss Effingham and her friend entered the drawing-room, a few minutes before dinner, to Mildred's unspeakable relief, they found no one down but Lord Elvaston, who, ensconced in a comfortable fauteuil, was reading the *Times* newspaper. Miss Effingham had not seen her father since the previous evening. He looked up as they entered.

"Good-morning, Miss Campbell. Well, Mildred, how do you do? I hope a night's repose and reflection have put to flight your strange caprices of yesterday. Upon my soul! Mildred, I was perfectly astounded, and could not divine what possessed you. Your mother made some excuse for your non-appearance at the breakfast table this morning; but I never saw you look better in my life. I appeal to you, Helen."

"I am pretty well again, dear papa. Do not let us talk any more about yesterday," said Miss Effingham, caressingly. "You have been to Stanmore: did you meet with Lady Tennyson, or Sir Richard?"

"To be sure. They drove up to the 'Queen's Head' while we were there. Oh! you would have been amused had you seen her ladyship's plight. Sir Richard's new horses, she said, had frightened her into fits; rearing, tearing, plunging, and nearly overturning the phaeton several times. As I thought there really was danger from that foolish fellow's headlong driving, I advised her to get out and wait at the hotel until her own carriage could be sent for; a piece of advice she was only too thankful to follow. But here come Alresford and Sir Gerard to talk to you girls whilst I finish my paper," cried Lord Elvaston good-naturedly, resuming his spectacles.

Mildred coloured deeply and, as Helen fancied, looked agitated. She half arose, however, and held out her hand as the earl advanced towards her.

"I hope I see Miss Effingham better?" said Lord Alresford, gravely, relinquishing her hand almost immediately.

"I am quite well, thank you," replied Mildred, with glowing cheek. She paused, and then added, "You have been riding with papa this morning?"

"Yes; we have been to Stanmore," replied the earl, coldly.

"Were there many people in town to-day?—I mean many of our friends," rejoined Mildred, resolved not to be daunted.

"The place seemed to me more animated than usual. Public interest, I suppose, was excited on the result of an investigation into certain charges against a Mr. Blakesley, going forward at the barracks. Lady Tennyson appeared especially interested in the proceedings."

"Miss Tennyson has been here this morning, and told us her mother was gone to Stanmore. She appeared rather alarmed for her, as Sir Richard was trying a pair of new horses in his phaeton for the first time."

"Yes; and I assure you Lady Tennyson also yielded very readily and gladly to your father's suggestion, that she should wait at the hotel for her own carriage."

"What! Have you seen my friend Miss Tennyson this morning?" exclaimed Sir Gerard. "I had a great deal of conversation with her after you left yesterday evening," continued he, addressing Helen. "How provoking that I was not at home!"

"Excessively so," said Helen, laughing; "but I am happy to tell you she left a special invitation for you to join a riding party to Fernly Abbey on Friday."

"Did she? Oh! of course I shall go. But, Miss Campbell, do you know she was more amiable still the other evening, and invited me to Settringham. But, tell me, how long have you been here?"

"Why, I cannot precisely tell. I arrived at the Priory about one o'clock, and now I should imagine it is six; I must leave you to find out the difference."

"Mrs. Campbell said you treated me most shamefully. I waited a considerable time, hoping to have the pleasure of walking with you here; but when I ventured to hint that I knew Miss Effingham expected you early, your brother Colin assured me your first conference together must be half over, as you had been gone two hours at the very least. I have been used most uncourteously. Do you not think so, Miss Effingham?"

Mildred did not reply. She was sitting with her back to Sir Gerard, bending over the pages of a large volume on the table. Lord Alresford was talking politics with her father, and Lady Elvaston sat reading in the little boudoir beyond; though her eye often wandered from her book, and rested on the occupants of the adjoining room. Sir Gerard did not repeat his question; but Helen, who, from her position, was enabled to catch a glance at Mildred's fair face, saw the deepened colour on her cheek, and hastened to reply.

"Trials, you know, Sir Gerard, often reveal striking virtues; therefore you ought, instead of blaming, to thank me for my flight, which exhibits to our admiration your virtue of patience."

"Now, Sir Gerard, both Helen and I expect a full and perfect account of your morning's adventures. In the first place, where have you been?" exclaimed Mildred, suddenly rising from her seat, and taking a chair near Helen.

"I have been out with Mr. Archibald Campbell. Your friend will tell you that is a sufficient guarantee," replied Sir Gerard, laughingly; "and I appeal to her, whether I ought not to be forthwith discharged without further examination."

"No; I have nothing further to do with it. Your cause is removed from my court."

"You are arraigned on the high charge of betaking yourself to your own devices, and suffering, in a most unknighly manner, a trio of ladies to sit down to their midday repast without an attempt on your part to pay them just and reasonable devoir," cried Mildred, sportively.

"Nay; justice, fair judge. Listen to my unanswerable defence. One beauteous lady, this morning, whether with or without cause I know not, refused to shower her bright smiles upon us, and left us uncertain how long the eclipse would last. Still, however, intent upon doing her good service, I went in search of her sister grace, who, in the most subtle manner, likewise fled my good offices. Now, I say the first lady is the cause of all the misconceptions which have arisen, and I think ought to change places with the accused," replied Sir Gerard, fixing his eyes keenly on her face.

Miss Effingham coloured deeply, but presently resumed the conversation. Helen thought she had seldom seen her so animated. She talked merrily also at the dinner table, but Helen remarked a restless unsteady glitter in her eye, especially when it met that of the earl; who also cheerfully bore his share in the conversation, but, as on the day before, watched her attentively. It was a most lovely summer evening; a soft refreshing breeze poured through the open windows of the dining-room, and the setting sun shot forth beams tinged with the brightest blue, green, and crimson, the wavy ripples of the noble lake, which stretched away far into the park on the south side of the mansion.

"The evening is really too inviting to remain within doors," exclaimed Lord Elvaston, approaching one of the windows, when the ladies arose to retire. "I never remember seeing a more splendid sunset! Suppose we go down to the lake and have a row, before coffee?"

"Exactly the very evening for boating. Alresford, does it not remind you of Morges and our perilous excursion with Lord Willingham and his daughter, on the Lake of Geneva? I shall never forget Lady Catherine's self-possession on that occasion."

"We had a very narrow escape, I own," replied Lord Alres-

ford. "But, Lady Elvaston, I trust Sir Gerard's reminiscences of past dangers will not deter you now from accompanying us."

"I shall enjoy it exceedingly. Helen, you will come,—and you also Mildred. It is impossible to resist the temptation of such an evening."

"Then, since we are all agreed, I will ring and order Ashford to get the boat ready; and if you, my dear, will go and put on your shawl and then walk down to the lake you will find us awaiting you there," said Lord Elvaston.

In a very short time all the party assembled on the grassy margin of the lake. Sir Gerard sprang into the boat, which rocked and dipped on the surface of the clear shining water, and seizing an oar pushed it forwards to the landing-stairs.

"Come, Miss Campbell, why do you not get in? Let me help you," said Lord Elvaston. "Keep the boat steady, Baynton."

Helen turned and looked for Mildred. She was standing, apparently in deep reverie, a few yards distant.

"Mildred, why don't you come?" continued Lord Elvaston, impatiently. "The beauty of the evening will have vanished before we get you all into the boat."

"I do not think I shall go in the boat this evening, papa, so do not wait for me," said Miss Effingham, approaching. "I have just remembered an errand which ought not to be delayed; and I am going, instead, across the park to Norris's."

"What nonsense, Mildred! Send your maid to-morrow and come along;" said her father, sharply.

What can this new freak mean? thought Helen; though she could scarce repress a smile at the evident amusement depicted on Sir Gerard's face.

"No, papa, thank you, I prefer going myself," responded Mildred, in very decisive tones: she then turned towards Lord Alresford, and the rich colour mounted to her cheek, as she added,—“Would it be disagreeable, or too much, to ask your lordship to forego this excursion and walk with me?”

"Certainly not. It will give me great pleasure, if you wish it," replied the earl.

Mildred blushed crimson, and for a moment a powerful impulse prompted her to step into the boat; but she repressed it, and silently took Lord Alresford's arm, while her father, with a shrug, hurried Helen in, and, following himself, wished the pedestrians a pleasant walk, and the party pushed off.

"What a handsome couple they make!" exclaimed Sir Gerard in a low voice to Helen, as Lord Alresford and Mildred pursued their way along the border of the lake, a little in advance of the boat. "How gracefully Miss Effingham

atoned for her caprice, neglect—or what shall I call it—of last night!”

Meanwhile, Mildred and the earl proceeded on their way in silence. It was a glorious evening, and all around seemed gay, glowing and harmonious. Now magnificent trees for a little space overshadowed their path, rearing and entwining their lofty boughs so as at times to shut out even a glimpse of the deep blue sky above, then suddenly breaking and studying the soft turf with clusters of three or four, down to the water's edge. Thousands of various flies and insects flitted with dreamy buzz over the transparent water, settling lazily on the pale lilies floating on its surface like cups of drifted snow; and here and there a dark blue dragon-fly darted from its leafy covert, and after capriciously fluttering from one delicate blossom to another, dived with lightning speed amid the fragrant herbage and vegetation of an adjoining meadow. In the distance, the park stretched far as the eye could range, chequered with deep shadows and bright sunny patches, upon which numerous herds of deer indolently basked. As for Mildred, her heart beat violently, and she could scarcely believe that she was really leaning on the arm of the dreaded Lord Alresford, and had of her own free will absolutely subjected herself to a *tête-à-tête*.

“It is now nearly a year and a half since we strolled thus together, Mildred. What numberless events have glided by during this interval!” at length observed the earl, slowly; and there was something in the deep full tones which seemed to say—“and how little better are we acquainted!”

“You have chiefly passed this period abroad,” rejoined Mildred, hastily.

“Yes; I have wandered in Italy, and through the south of France. I quitted Venice about four months ago.”

Mildred remembered Venice, and the earl's unanswered letters, and hastened to change the subject.

“What a lovely evening!” exclaimed she; “all things appear so fresh and fragrant under this glowing sky. I think there is nothing so delightful as to linger out of doors during one of these delicious sunsets!”

“It is so, indeed; and hard must that nature be, which, amid a scene of such calm loveliness and repose, does not cast from it some of the dross of earth, and feel the purer and better from its commune with Him who created all things so fair and harmonious! Abroad, scenery is on a more gigantic scale; but perhaps, excepting some parts of Germany, one never meets, out of Old England, with the rich pastures and woodlands, ever-verdant turf and green hedgerows, which form so conspicuous a *point-de-vue* in our English landscapes. I am glad, however, Mildred, to find you have the taste requisite

to make a good *châtelaine*—a keen sense and enjoyment of the beauties of the country.”

“Ah, yes! no one can love bright sun, flowers, and foliage, more than I do,” replied Mildred quickly; piqued that the earl should imagine her (as by his last words she hastily concluded he did) so devoid of refined feeling and sentiment, as to express such vivid pleasure that at least he had discovered one congenial point in their tastes and pursuits. “But at the risk of exciting your surprise at my want of taste, I must be candid enough to confess that I should reluctantly pass the entire year in the country. We generally spend three or four months in town.”

“I quite agree with you. To thoroughly enjoy the country—or rather, I should say, to appreciate it—requires the novelty and contrast of the heated rooms and dingy atmosphere of town.”

“But do you not think custom and fashion, in people of our station, render such a visit indispensable? How could one be *au courant* with the world, literature,—in fact, anything,—if eternally buried in the country?” demanded Mildred, resolutely.

“You quite mistake my meaning, Mildred. I think a yearly sojourn in town for persons of our condition—in short, for everyone, most delightful and beneficial; but I should be sorry to see any person for whom I had a regard, partake in all the dissipation of a London season, and after months of fevered excitement, return home broken in health, and morally unfitted for the discharge of her highest and most sacred duties.”

Oh,—thought Mildred,—this is a gentle hint of what I may expect, and the rule and method to be observed at his lordship’s town mansion.

“Nay, perhaps, you will find it difficult to engraft your standard upon others; and to make it quite clear how much, or how little, they may mingle with the world to insure your approbation,” responded she, playfully.

“Not my approval alone, Mildred. I would fain hope that principle, and the knowledge that we are accountable beings for all the good and evil of our actions—for all occasions lost, or trifled away, of doing good—would be a far nobler guide and aim. Besides, I am sure you will agree with me that a woman, whether wife or daughter of a man of large landed estate, has far greater opportunities for active benevolence, and of making herself beloved and revered among the tenantry or poor dependants of her husband or father—and, consequently, of opening to herself a purer source of pleasure—than amidst the frivolity of fashionable dissipation.”

“Oh, I dare say all you say is true enough,” rejoined

Mildred, slightly tossing her graceful head ; "but I confess I have small vocation to play the part of parish Lady Bountiful !"

Perverse, perverse Mildred ! Had Helen been by, she would have proclaimed that scarce was there a cottager in Greysdon or its neighbourhood, whose heart did not glow with gratitude, when it mused on the kindly counsels and pecuniary relief oftentimes bestowed by the fair young lady of the Priory.

"Indeed ! Do you remember, Mildred, what that stinging censor of mankind, La Rochefoucauld, says, '*Nous nous faisons quelquefois honneur des défauts opposés à ceux que nous avons* ?'" replied the earl, with a smile.

"Nay, the virtue of such persons must be small indeed, to require the aid of so powerful a contrast. But see !" continued she, pointing towards the lake, "the boat is a mere speck now. The breeze must be swift this evening, or rather, perhaps, 'tis Sir Gerard Baynton's skilful rowing. What a lively good-natured man he is !"

"Baynton is a favourite wherever he goes, and most deservedly ; for never was there anyone more estimable and high principled. Lady Emily Baynton, likewise, is just the mother such a son may indeed be proud of. She is precisely the type of what a woman of rank ought to be—gentle, dignified, benevolent, and devoted to the welfare of others. Lady Emily constantly resides at the Chauntry, and I hope, Mildred, if Amesbury ever becomes your home, you will greatly benefit by her society ; for although I do not generally approve of female confidential friends, there is no one I should so sincerely rejoice to see you intimate with."

"Your lordship's code appears to me a very singular and stringent one. May I ask your objection to female friends ?" said Mildred, proudly.

"Certainly. I think a woman can have no better confidant than her husband, and all things she cannot fearlessly confide to him had much better remain unspoken. I confess I should be so far jealous of my wife's affection, that I could not tolerate another should possess, to my exclusion, that confidence which, from the moment she bestowed upon me her hand, is mine by right."

Mildred said nothing in reply, and for a few minutes they walked on in silence, along a narrow green drive they had just entered, sheltered on both sides by thriving plantations, which led straight to the lodge Mildred wished to visit. The grass was soft, and spangled with hundreds of bright flowerets, mingling with clustering thickets of double gorse covered with golden blossoms, and birds fluttered joyously amid the hawthorn bushes, the boundary lines of the plantations.

Lord Alresford paused at a sudden break in the woods, through which a fine view of the park and its noble avenues of limes was obtained.

"Admirably as your father, Mildred, has laid out the park and gardens here, I cannot help flattering myself you will find greater beauties at Amesbury. The ground there is more undulating, and the timber older; and disposed, if possible, even more picturesquely than this. My father had great taste, and adorning and beautifying Amesbury was one of his passions."

"Yes; I have often heard from papa and others, of your noble park at Amesbury. The grounds around the mansion are also beautifully arranged, I am told."

"I have lately been making considerable alterations since my return from Italy, aided by the good taste of my two friends, Lady Emily Baynton and Lady Catherine. When I quitted home, Mildred, the parterres of the garden, into which open the windows of the suite of rooms I had selected for you two years ago, were glowing with lovely roses. I ordered them to be planted in such profusion, knowing you preferred roses to any other flower."

Mildred's heart beat; she would have given worlds to put the query, and hear from the earl's lips, why at that period he had rejected her hand: and as she walked along, how vividly did the wish arise, that her marriage had then taken place.

"It was very kind of you to think thus for my gratification," said she in a low voice, turning away her head to conceal the tears which sprang to her eyes. After a pause, she added quickly,—"Lady Catherine Neville, I suppose, intends now to reside permanently at Wardour Court."

"Yes; she has quite established herself there. Lord Willingham was long in a declining state of health, and died (as of course you know) at Narbonne, on his road home. Luckily, I was then also abroad, and hastened to offer every consolation and aid in my power to Lady Catherine. Her meek resignation to the blow which bereaved her of her only parent, and left her unprotected in the world, was unequalled; but young as she is, her mind is one of extraordinary power, blended with a disposition noble, firm, and so totally free from caprice, that 'tis impossible for anyone long to withhold their tribute of admiration."

Unconsciously as Lord Alresford spoke, a vivid flush mounted to Mildred's brow, and she hurriedly withdrew her hand from the earl's arm.

"It must be a source of infinite consolation to Lady Catherine to reside so near to Amesbury, I should imagine," said she at length, in constrained tones.

Lord Alresford turned in surprise, and bent a keen glance

on his companion. Miss Effingham's head was averted, but her beautiful figure moved with more stately an air than was its wont. A smile curled the earl's lip, and a peculiar expression flitted across his features.

"She has often been kind and condescending enough to express herself so," rejoined he, calmly.

Mildred bit her lip.

"Indeed!" replied she, drawing the folds of her shawl closer round her figure, and walking on with a step still more determined. Lord Alresford again attentively regarded her.

"Mildred," at length said he, firmly, but gently, "let us not raise imaginary barriers, I beseech you. I fear, unhappily, there are already too many real ones to surmount, before we arrive at a right understanding of each other. Believe me, once for all, when I tell you, Lady Catherine can never inspire me with greater interest than is her due as my ward, and, moreover, a very dear and prized friend."

Mildred trembled, and a vivid colour suffused her cheek. She felt profoundly mortified that her secret pique towards Lady Catherine should have been so promptly detected, and her awe of the earl returned in full force; as she saw no considerations, no trifling, would deter him from fearlessly administering the antidote to all fancied perverse misconceptions on her part. "How he must despise me!" thought she, "for cherishing and betraying such littleness, and acting so very contrary to his own open candour."

"Indeed, my lord, your are mistaken. I sought not,—needed not such an explanation!" exclaimed she eagerly. After an embarrassed pause, she then rapidly added,—“Does not Lady Catherine find Wardour Court very dull and solitary?”

"She does not live alone, or otherwise I am sure she must. Mrs. Otway, a distant cousin of the late Lady Willingham's, who has been her friend for years, resides with her still."

"What, my lord, after your openly avowed disapproval of female confidants!" exclaimed Mildred, archly.

"Lady Catherine is not a wife; therefore in her position it is highly desirable she should possess some such friend," replied Lord Alresford, smiling: "but, Mildred, I have neither the right nor the power, even if I so willed, to deprive the Lady Catherine of the society of any friends she chooses to cultivate; or even to obtrude my opinions upon her. Before, I was speaking of my wife——"

"But would you wish to deprive your wife of her friends?" demanded Mildred with spirit.

"Most certainly not. I would have her prize their friendship as ever, but I must have all her confidence—all her heart,

or none! Do you think me *exigeant*?" replied Lord Alresford, riveting his gaze keenly on her blushing cheek.

"Yes," faltered Mildred. Then she added quickly,—“You consider, then, this perfect confidence an obligation binding only on one side?”

“Far from it. Let me only respect my wife, her principles, and conduct, and she will have little cause to complain.”

Mildred was silent, and they proceeded until they came in sight of the lodge—the object of her walk.

“I shall not have time to speak with Norris this evening; we have walked so slowly. Upon second thoughts, I will send Aglaë with a message to-morrow morning,” said Mildred, pausing.

“Then, shall we turn homewards again?”

Miss Effingham assented.

“What an exceedingly elegant, accomplished girl your friend Miss Campbell appears, Mildred,” said the earl, after a short silence.

“Indeed, she is,” replied Mildred, warmly; “and pretty as she is, her goodness surpasses it, as much as she is herself superior to all the world. Yesterday evening——”

She paused.

“Well Mildred,—yesterday evening. I am anxious to hear every explanation you can possibly afford,” rejoined the earl, kindly, and very earnestly.

“But if I have none to offer—at least not at present,” murmured Mildred, after a pause, while a slight tremor shook her frame.

“Then recur not to the subject, I entreat, Miss Effingham,” replied the earl, severely.

“Your lordship is right. It is a period too exquisitely painful to be lightly recalled,” retorted Mildred, haughtily.

The earl merely bowed, and immediately changed the conversation: but Mildred's heart was heavy. Bewildering thoughts came crowding on her fancy; not, however, unmingled with bitter self-reproach. She could not refrain from mentally acknowledging how much the earl was superior in intellect to him for whom he had been so faithlessly deserted. She recalled the refined and ever-ready flattery always at Colonel Sutherland's command, and compared it with the stern sincerity and proud truthfulness of Lord Alresford; and in spite of herself, conscience whispered which was most worthy to be prized and treasured. “It is clear he does not love me,” mused Mildred: “no! I have alienated him for ever; else would he so pitilessly expose my failings? Yet I feel I could attain even to his standard. Sutherland doubts me not; yes, I could be happier with one who appreciates me!”

The earl did not interrupt her reverie, and they rapidly continued their homeward walk. The light had gradually faded away into purple twilight, and wreaths of white mist curled and struggled over the distant lowlands of the park, and around the margin of the lake.

"Your shawl is quite damp. I hope you will not feel any ill effects from our late walk," said Lord Alresford, as they stood a minute together in the hall.

"Oh, no ; I am accustomed to be out late."

"I trust we are beginning to understand each other better, Mildred," exclaimed the earl, as for a second he retained her little hand within his own.

"Yes : I think so : perhaps !" said Mildred, as she darted away from his side, and entered the drawing-room.

Lord Alresford took three or four more turns on the terrace, and then re-entered the mansion.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET MARRIAGE.

A GORGEOUS sunset, some ten months prior to the events of the preceding chapters, shed its glowing hues, and blended into one mass of dazzling vapour, the rugged peaks and dark outline of the ridge of rocky hills which divides the fair province of Languedoc from Roussillon. The day had been oppressively hot : the steady sultry heat of the south, when no soft cloud flits over the sun's disc to stay the ardent beam, under which the verdant foliage loses its fresh crispness and the fairest blossoms droop ; and the setting sun, curtained in glorious effulgence, sank at last, and disappeared behind the gloomy and magnificent chain of the Pyrenees, bounding the far horizon ; flooding the sky, around and over the ancient city of Narbonne, with clouds of the deepest transparent rose colour. A fresh invigorating breeze then blew down from the mountains, and the people poured from their close, stifling houses into the dingy streets — of what, alas ! was once the far-famed capital of the largest and most important of the Roman divisions of Gaul — to inhale the cool air ; and to gaze, perchance with envy and admiration, on the picturesque attire and indolent luxury of the occupants of the balconies running along the façade of a few of the houses occupied by the chief citizens of Narbonne. All the inhabitants of that ancient city—so isolated from the world

by its peculiar situation—appeared joyous on this calm summer evening. They paused, earnestly discoursing in knots of from three to four, on the margin of the sluggish little stream intersecting the town, which now rippled and flowed forwards with unwonted speed as the light wind arose. The theme, however, of all the loiterers, high and low, was the same; the busy imaginations of all were employed speculating on the arrival and probable stay of a wealthy English nobleman; whom sickness, apparently, compelled to become a sojourner in their little unfrequented city. Marvellous rumours were likewise afloat of the extraordinary beauty of a fair young girl, his daughter, who appeared to lavish the tenderest care and affection on the invalid.

In days of yore, the birth of an imperial heir, or the pompous pageant of the triumphant entry of some victorious general from foreign conquest, was scarce sufficient to excite the interest of the haughty citizens of Narbonne; but now its modern inhabitants, with most undignified pertinacity, in the hope of catching the slightest glimpse of their wealthy visitors, crowded towards the venerable mansion where they had taken up their abode. But the curiosity of the worthy Narbonnois, if such it were, was doomed to disappointment. The blinds and clumsy wooden shutters of the tall, toppling mansion were closed, and the strangers suffered no outward sign to escape, that they enjoyed or luxuriated in the delicious *fresco* which emptied half the houses in Narbonne.

At the back, however, of this ancient mansion spread a garden teeming with fragrant flowers, rich, varied, and glowing; as different from the sickly produce of our northern greenhouses and stoves, as fresh air, space, and the soft dews of heaven could render them. On one side of the garden arose the square towers of the fortress-palace of the Archbishop of Narbonne, and the exquisite Gothic façade of the cathedral, and all around were spires almost countless: for as the province of Languedoc can boast of possessing many of the richest benefices in France, so could Narbonne then, for its size, glory in the number and wealth of its churches and monastic establishments.

Along the front of the second story of the mansion stretched a broad balcony, terminating at both ends by a flight of stone steps, flanked by a balustrade of rough marble, descending to the garden. On this balcony—or rather terrace, as from its breadth it might be properly called—close to the balustrade, stood a small couch, and on the stone beside lay a pile of faded brocade cushions. A long, narrow window opened on the balcony, the door of which, pushed back, disclosed a small, gloomy-looking apartment, yclept the salon of the mansion, with muslin hangings and a dingy parquet; which, as the

worthy Narbonnois, intrenched in their mountain fastness, were still far from having attained the refinement of their more accessible neighbours, had seldom glowed beneath the vigorous exertions of the *frotteur*. The various articles strewn over the table in the centre seemed strangely at variance with the style and general aspect of the room. There was a piece of embroidery, and silks of every hue in an ivory box by its side. A small book lay open, also, with sketching materials around ; and close to them stood a magnificent magnolia with its large flaky petals expanded over the edge of a vase of turquoise blue, and at the other end of the table lay a huge piece of knitting, with pins like spears thrust through a ball of wool. A large fauteuil and several smaller ones, with a somewhat flecked mirror in a tarnished gold frame, completed the furniture of the apartment.

To return, however, to the balcony: On one of the faded crimson cushions close to the foot of the couch, knelt a young girl ; her arms resting on the top of the low parapet, and one hand supporting her head. She was attired in white ; and her dress admirably displayed the symmetry of her small rounded bust and slender figure. Rows of delicate lace fell around her throat, confined at the bosom by a rich jewel, and sparkling rings encircled the slight fingers raised to her brow, supporting one of the most graceful little heads imaginable ; around which twined shining bands of hair—soft, fine, and black as the purest jet—gathered into a heavy knot behind. Her complexion was clear olive, with the very faintest tinge of pink colouring the dimpled cheek ; the mouth, small, full, and, perhaps, rather voluptuous in its expression ; and the contour of her face a faultless oval. Her brow was smooth as ivory, rather low than otherwise, but wide and ample ; and the nose small, and delicately moulded. But beautiful and refined as was the Lady Catherine Neville, there was still something more fascinating in the soft deep tones of her voice, and in the impassioned and fervid language which occasionally burst from her lips ; contrasting as it did with the usually calm thoughtfulness of her ordinary demeanour.

Lady Catherine's education had been *soignée*, and cultivated in the highest degree. Her mind was lofty and impetuous, attuned to the soft glowing romance of the south, where she had spent the greater part of her life. Early left to her own guidance by the increasing and fatal malady under which her father laboured, Lady Catherine acquired a courageous and fearless decision of character and action, surprising in one so young ; and these her peculiar circumstances, and the responsibility which attached itself so early to her lot, induced habits of deep reflection, verging sometimes on melancholy. From her father, broken in health and enfeebled in intellect,

she derived little help : in Mrs. Otway, the friend of her childhood, she found an affectionate sympathiser in her difficulties, indeed ; but one whose counsel ebbed and flowed as the restless ocean, and shook with every passing breeze. Thus Lady Catherine, ceasing at length to look for aid from those around her, persevered unfalteringly in all things that her own high principle and clear judgment approved without a shadow of a doubt ; in all others, where circumstances demanded further counsel, she sought and obtained it in the steady friendship of Lord Alresford, the son of her father's oldest friend, then likewise resident at Venice. Fearlessly the Lady Catherine asked, and eagerly improved, every opportunity for more intimate acquaintance with one whose opinion she so highly appreciated ; without the slightest apprehension for her future peace. True, though she had been previously informed by her father of Lord Alresford's engagement to Miss Effingham, and had even heard its acknowledgment from the earl's own lips, yet still there might have been peril in this familiar intercourse, had not the safeguard slumbered in her own bosom ; for the beautiful Lady Catherine loved passionately, with the whole strength of her enthusiastic, ardent spirit.

Motionless she knelt on the balcony, leaning over the balustrade, as if in deep meditation. More than once her hand swept across her brow, and a restless flash lighted her eye. Presently she laid her head on the end of the couch, and wept convulsively. Around, everything was placid and still, save that now the air vibrated to the musical tinkling of the small vesper bells from the numerous spires and towers throughout the city of Narbonne. Had religion there been pure and undefiled, free from the mockeries of man's superstition, the service of the sanctuary had, indeed, been performed with edifying devotion in this little city, and perfect incense of prayer and supplication would daily have ascended to the Throne of Mercy ; for no less than four hundred ecclesiastics were perpetually employed within its churches, in chanting services, requiems, and masses.

Some quarter of an hour thus elapsed, when the door of the salon opened, and a light step glided towards the balcony. Lady Catherine hurriedly dashed the tears from her eyes, and, half turning, found her friend Mrs. Otway seated just without the window, quietly unrolling her knitting.

"Dear Mrs. Otway," exclaimed she, earnestly, "I hope you left papa tolerably comfortable. Has he not gone to sleep rather earlier than usual, to-night ?"

"I wish, my dear, you would try and not worry yourself so terribly. Positively, Lady Catherine, you will fret until you are quite ill. I am beginning to be seriously miserable about you," replied Mrs. Otway, in a tone of expostulation, as she

gazed on the fair cheek, wet still with traces of recent tears.

"Well—but about papa, Mrs. Otway. How do you think he seems this evening?"

"To tell you the truth, my dear, his lordship appears strangely uneasy to-night. I read the papers to him for some time; but, as the restlessness did not abate, I summoned Dr. Gordon."

"I must go to him this moment!" exclaimed Lady Catherine springing to her feet. "Oh, Mrs. Otway, why did you not send for me?" added she, reproachfully.

"Stay, my dear Lady Catherine," said Mrs. Otway, hastily dropping her knitting. "Be not so impetuous, I beseech! Dr. Gordon begged me to leave his lordship's room, and particularly desired that his patient should not be disturbed again to-night. I assure you, my dear, I left the doctor sitting by the bedside, with his fingers on Lord Willingham's pulse: and he insisted your father should be left to his care," added Mrs. Otway, as she caught the Lady Catherine's half-doubting glance: aware that the latter more than half suspected her, on many occasions, of being more careful of her pupil's ease than solicitous that she should act to the strict letter of her duty.

Lady Catherine threw herself on the couch.

"I want you to tell me, Mrs. Otway, what you really think of papa's condition: I mean, since we quitted Venice?" said she, after an interval of a few minutes.

Mrs. Otway hesitated.

"Why, your question is rather a difficult one, and I scarcely know how to give my opinion on a case which varies apparently every day. At any rate, my dear, I can so far conscientiously say, I think Lord Willingham has made extraordinary progress during these last few days: and that he seems wonderfully revived again from the attack which compelled us to stay in this wretched place," replied she at length, glancing round the room.

"I trust papa does not find the smallness of his room here oppressive—so very different to what he has been accustomed to in Italy," mused Lady Catherine.

"No, I do not think his lordship feels inconvenienced; but even if he did, you know, my dear, there is no help for it. Dr. Gordon declared it would be death to remove him forwards another stage. Thanks, however, to the doctor's medicine-chest, and our own excellent supplies, we have everything requisite for the comfort of our dear invalid: and most fortunate it is: for you will hardly believe, Catherine, Wilmot went into every shop and store throughout this miserable hole, in the vain hope of procuring a little *eau de luce*, which we

thought your father would find pleasant during these sultry days."

"I am not at all surprised. But my dear, kind friend, pray be explicit with me. Dr. Gordon is not sufficiently so, and I fear holds out false hope; therefore tell me, I conjure you, has he ever said anything to you about my father's case?"

"I fancy Dr. Gordon does not anticipate immediate danger, and trusts Lord Willingham may have strength to bear the journey home; and when once safely arrived at Wardour Court, one can scarcely tell what miracle the air may effect. You must not be daunted, my dear Catherine, by our unlucky break-down here; for really the roads we travelled upon were villainous enough to shake the most robust constitution," said Mrs. Otway, rising, and seating herself on the couch by Lady Catherine.

"Of my dear father's ultimate recovery, I have long, long despaired: but a dread presentiment pursues me, that some fatal catastrophe will happen here. God grant my fears may not be realised!" said Lady Catherine, covering her face with her hands.

"It was certainly most unfortunate that the earl insisted on this foolish journey through the south of France, on his way home. Oh! how I wish we were safely arrived there!" exclaimed Mrs. Otway.

"Should this dreadful calamity happen, what is to become of me?" observed Lady Catherine, abstractedly.

"We will go home to Wardour Court, dearest."

"Home!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, with a sigh, and the words lingered bitterly on her beautiful lips. "Yes; but I am a stranger there! Who will welcome me back? What heart anticipates my arrival, or who will care whether I go or stay away? My own recollections of Wardour Court are vague and faint: I connect always its idea with a dark, cloister-looking mansion, smooth-shaven lawns, dark woods, sombre alleys, in fact, everything dismal!"

"If you learn to love Wardour Court as well as your dear mother did, Catherine, you will find every comfort and happiness there: to this very day, as you know, her name is beloved amongst the tenantry," cried Mrs. Otway, earnestly. "But, my dear, I have a suggestion to offer. I think you ought to write immediately to Lord Alresford: though, perhaps, as that little head treasures matchless wisdom, you may have done so already."

"No, indeed, I have not; but I will follow your advice to-morrow."

Mrs. Otway smiled, well pleased that she had for once given her beloved *élève* a piece of valuable counsel.

"Wardour Court and Amesbury are quite close together,"

continued she, complacently. "Ah! I do nothing but perpetually regret that noble looking Lord Alresford should be betrothed to Lord Elvaston's daughter. What a delightful marriage it would have been for you, my dear?"

"Nay; here you and I must differ, my dear, old friend," said Lady Catherine, laughing. "Do you know I never suspected you of half such romantic nonsense. No, no; Lord Alresford and I, though we bear each other most warm friendship, are the very last persons in the world to fall in love: our intimacy has been far too real, open, and free from illusion."

"Do you think Lord Alresford is really attached to Miss Effingham, Catherine?"

"Yes, I am certain of it. I understand the marriage is soon to take place."

Mrs. Otway raised her eyes earnestly to Lady Catherine's face, and in so doing let half a dozen stitches or so drop off her pin: for the kind-hearted old lady had long set her heart, and puzzled her brains, to devise a scheme which should elevate her pupil to the rank of spouse to the man whom she so much admired and revered.

"Positively, the stitches in this tiresome scarlet stripe have slipped again! I declare, these tinkling bells are enough to distract the most skilful knitter in Christendom! One might just as comfortably be seated in a belfry as on this terrace," exclaimed Mrs. Otway, wrathfully, seizing the first *casus belli* which presented itself.

Lady Catherine quietly took the knitting, and soon restored the stitches on the pin.

"Thank you, my darling. You are always ready to assist me in all my difficulties," said Mrs. Otway, fondly kissing her forehead. "The Conways, your old playfellows, will rejoice to see you home again, I am sure. Don't you remember, Catherine, in all your juvenile sports, the young Lord Norman-ton used to call himself your champion, and sustain your rights most gallantly?"

"Yes; he was a fine, noble-spirited boy. How very odd I should so completely have lost sight of them all! Maude Conway, I remember, a fair cherub of a child, with flaxen hair and blue eyes. I dare say I shall not recognise any again."

"Then, my dear, there is your cousin, Mr. Egremont Turville; who, having gained his cause, intends to settle at Nethercote. Did you read the letter he wrote to your papa last week? He seems quite enchanted at the prospect of your speedy return."

"Yes; but why he should be, astonished me when I read his letter. Mr. Turville has never seen papa for many years, and me not at all," said Lady Catherine, languidly.

"Well, I think I have satisfactorily proved we shall be ob-

jects of interest to somebody. Besides, my dear, I presume you do not intend to pass your life in single blessedness?" added the old lady, somewhat slyly.

Lady Catherine's fair face flushed.

"I suppose I shall follow the destiny of most women, and marry some day," said she, faintly.

"I think it a very likely thing, too, my beautiful child!" rejoined Mrs. Otway, with a triumphant smile, as she gazed in the lovely, pensive face turned towards her. "But, tell me, Catherine, are there none of the heap of suitors introduced to your notice by your aunt, Madame de Pezzaro, sufficiently emboldened to follow you, after a space, to England?"

"Nay, tell me first which you approved of most," said Lady Catherine, evasively, turning away her head.

"Well, then, there was the Count Von Leinendorf."

"A conceited blockhead, perpetually dreaming of his forty-seven quarterings; and who actually did me the honour to inform me that I was indebted for the sublime offer of his hand to the flattering fact that my lozenge would admirably fill a vacant corner in his shield."

"Then, what do you say to the Prince of Aveiro?"

"Worse and worse. The Prince has been a widower twice; and, as the count obligingly informed me, possesses half a dozen children or more, reared in the solitude of some Calabrian stronghold."

"Then were the condesa's efforts totally fruitless? I must own, I took a great fancy to our intelligent countryman, Mr. Randolph," rejoined Mrs. Otway; taking a furtive, sidelong glance at the countenance of her young friend.

"Yes; Mr. Randolph was of a far different calibre to my Italian suitors, doubtless," replied Lady Catherine, blushing deeply.

"He has such very winning manners. I protest, the sound of his frank, joyous voice recalled old times, I cannot tell you how vividly. But, Catherine, did Mr. Randolph leave no other impression upon you than that of a very agreeable acquaintance?"

Lady Catherine appeared strongly agitated, and her head sank again on the couch.

"Never mind, my dear, never mind: don't answer my question," exclaimed Mrs. Otway, quickly. "I dare say, some day I shall know all. We won't talk any more about Mr. Randolph."

"Nay, you shall know all about it, now, my dear old friend. So, to cut a long story short, we found out somehow we both loved; and—the fact is, we have plighted faith to each other," cried Lady Catherine, impetuously, seizing Mrs. Otway's hand, while bright tears glittered in her dark eyes.

"Lady Catherine! My dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Otway, in consternation, the knitting gliding from her fingers to the ground. "What is it you tell me? Have you reflected well? Does Lord Willingham know of this engagement?"

"Mr. Randolph is a great favourite with papa."

"Yes; but does he think him a sufficient match for you, Lady Catherine? Everybody must allow he is a most fascinating young man, but ——"

"But what?"

"Why, in my opinion, there is something very mysterious about Mr. Randolph. It is most extraordinary that, although he is received in the best society and is apparently wealthy and high born, nobody really knows who and what he is. Even Madame de Pezzaro used every effort to discover his family before she admitted him into her set, and totally failed; and you are aware your aunt is not a person to be easily foiled."

"It is not very likely that Mr. Randolph, if he has reasons for wishing to preserve his incognito, should suffer it to be bruited in my aunt's clique."

"No; but, my dear Catherine, when I remarked his great attention to you, I took every opportunity to draw from him, if possible, some account of himself; and, I confess, I was highly amused at the ingenious manner he parried my queries. When I fancied I had gained one little point, some casual remark of his would launch me again as far from the fact as ever. Depend upon it, my dear, he must have some mighty interest in concealing his past history; and unless Mr. Randolph explains all this clearly, forgive me if I declare my opinion to be that you ought to put an end to the affair at once. Now, I ask you, my dear, is this the case? Has Mr. Randolph explained all to your satisfaction?" said Mrs. Otway, waxing warm; for the danger she foresaw to her beloved pupil's future peace in this kind of unsatisfactory engagement aroused her energy.

"Mr. Randolph has explained nothing: but I love him, and therefore trust him!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, firmly, raising her head from the sofa pillow, while her cheek glowed.

"And has Lord Willingham actually consented to the marriage on these terms?" exclaimed Mrs. Otway in dismay, in a tone which indicated she conceived the earl had fairly taken leave of his senses.

"Papa has consented to my marriage only on condition Mr. Randolph explains these mysteries; so, pray, do not look so very concerned, dear Mrs. Otway," replied Lady Catherine, flinging her arm round the kind old lady's neck. "Mr. Randolph promised to leave for England six months after we quitted Italy, and it was arranged he should visit Wardour Court;

though he did half engage to see us once more at Bourdeaux ere we embarked."

"*A la bonne heure*, darling," exclaimed Mrs. Otway, her face once more radiant with smiles. "I thought neither you nor Lord Willingham could be so woefully rash. I trust with all my heart, that this handsome, engaging Mr. Randolph may succeed in making his case clear; for I think, next to Lord Alresford, he would be just the very husband for you, dear. I should not be surprised any day to see him arrive here."

"Perhaps he may," replied Lady Catherine, whilst a blush of conscious security stole over her beautiful face. "Let us go down into the garden, the flowers look so very inviting."

"Well, my dear, if anybody deserves to be happy, it is you, I am sure," replied Mrs. Otway, kissing her glowing cheek. "Ah! I think I hear Dr. Gordon's step in the next room, so if you will excuse me, I will now just ask him a few questions about the earl: and Catherine, it occurred to me some days ago, that there are some Randolphs whom I have heard a Scotch friend of mine frequently mention; so instead of joining you in the garden, after my little conversation is over with the doctor, I will write a few lines to Mrs. Macleod, and desire her to ascertain whether any of these Randolphs are abroad."

Lady Catherine smiled assent; for she knew how dearly her old friend loved to imagine herself overwhelmed with important business.

"You will mind and not remain out in the garden too late, Catherine, for night dews are always injurious: besides, in this queer place one does not know what loathsome reptiles may be lurking amid those masses of tangled grass and foliage yonder," said Mrs. Otway, as she lingered a moment before passing into the salon.

Lady Catherine, for a little space after she was gone, remained in deep meditation on the sofa. She then arose, and throwing a large black lace shawl over her head and shoulders, bounded down the steps into the garden. She strolled slowly along in the direction of a grove of almonds she had observed in her previous rambles; the rich green foliage of tall orange trees forming a wall on either side of the narrow alley through which her path lay. Beautiful flowers expanded their parched leaves to gather the heavy refreshing dew, and the air was laden with the delicious fragrance of countless orange blossoms, drooping and glistening amid the dark glossy foliage like transparent pearl drops. Lady Catherine wandered on in a perfect ecstasy of delight, until she came to a more clear and open space, when she threw herself on a seat, and prepared thoroughly to enjoy the scene. In the midst of the lawn, a small fountain bubbled up, scattering around a vapour of sparkling spray. Behind arose the majestic battlements and towers of the

cathedral ; which appeared so near, that she almost imagined she could trace its deep shadows in the fitful moonlight beaming around ; and on looking more earnestly, she at length perceived that in fact a high hedge of eglantine, and other prickly bushes, only separated its enclosure from the garden. She sat thus for a few minutes, but suddenly started nervously to her feet, as a dark shadow glided under the covert of the hedge, and moved rapidly forwards in the direction of the plot of grass of which the fountain formed the centre. Lady Catherine gathered her shawl closely round her, and darted forwards towards the house. The figure quickened its pace also, but presently she heard her own name uttered in a voice which sent the blood with a thrill to her heart. She paused, and hurriedly threw the veil from her head ; but ere she could articulate a syllable, she found herself clasped in the arms of Mr. Randolph.

"Catherine, dearest !"

"Oh, Frederic, you terrified me so ! What can bring you hither in this mysterious manner ?" said Lady Catherine, raising her head from her lover's shoulder.

"Nay, Catherine, I pray you, look not so scared," exclaimed Mr. Randolph, lightly kissing again and again her glowing cheek, and drawing her gently towards the bench, from which she had fled on his approach. "How is Lord Willingham to night ?"

"Dear papa is a little better to-day, but I cannot, alas ! flatter myself the amendment is permanent. But, Frederic, I am all impatience to learn how you discovered us in this remote place ; for you cannot have received my letter : besides, what can be the meaning of your extraordinary apparition in this garden ?"

"Your first query is easily explained ; I did receive your note, Catherine."

Lady Catherine made a gesture of surprise.

"Luckily," continued Mr. Randolph, "I met your messenger, dearest, at Marseilles ; for in truth, I should have been sorely perplexed on arriving at Bordeaux not to find you there, so without an instant's delay I travelled hither. Is it now Dr. Gordon's opinion, Catherine, that your father will have strength enough to reach England ?"

"Dr. Gordon thinks there is slight hope. He greatly builds, I believe, on the beneficial effect of the sea-voyage home."

"And afterwards, Catherine ?"

"Afterwards !" and the word faltered on her trembling lip ; "afterwards, I shall be an orphan, desolate, in a land of strangers !"

"Lord Willingham loves you dearly, Catherine——"

A low sob burst from her lips.

"His loss will entail upon you severe affliction."

"Severe affliction! Say rather it will be a calamity, which will cast its shadow over the remainder of my life!" exclaimed Lady Catherine vehemently.

"Dearest Catherine, do you then know none of the people amongst whom this terrible bereavement will probably happen?" asked Mr. Randolph, in a low voice. "Who, then, will comfort and console you?"

"Mrs. Otway; and shall I not have—Oh, Frederic, what mean you? Why torture me thus?" said she, in a voice of agony; suddenly pausing as the thought flashed through her brain that perhaps he who could thus speculate on her anguish, might be there to bid her farewell for ever.

"Catherine, have you reflected on my proposal at Venice, which you promised to answer ere you sailed for England?" whispered Mr. Randolph, in a voice nearly as agitated as her own, seizing her hand, and drawing her towards him until her head rested on his bosom.

Lady Catherine started.

"Catherine, do you love me? Ay, you have said so: you have sworn so; and yet you hesitate!" exclaimed Mr. Randolph, impatiently, as she still continued silent. "At this crisis, will you reject a love and an affection devoted to you? Speak!"

Lady Catherine raised her head. Her cheek was white almost as the pale moonlight around, but her voice, though low, was firm.

"Frederic, the memory of that last interview haunts me always; for it was wrong in me ever to allow you to suppose I would entertain such a design. I have reflected; I cannot consent to what you propose."

"But your father sanctions our union! Has he not consented? Catherine, my beloved, give me the right to console; for why suffer a foolish scruple of propriety to intervene between vows, which once spoken would bring such abundant consolation?"

"Remember, my father's consent was but conditional," murmured Lady Catherine.

"Perhaps the Lady Catherine Neville repents that she has pledged her faith to one unknown, untitled—one, in short, whom report has more than once proclaimed plebeian," said Mr. Randolph, coldly.

"Frederic, why torture me thus? You know you are unjust, cruel! Have I ever deserved so harsh a taunt?"

"Is your love, then, as truthful and strong, Catherine, as during that calm Sicilian sunset, when you plighted to me this hand? Do you repent?"

"No! I repent not of what I then promised! To you alone

have I given myself. Why, knowing this, you choose to continue mysterious still, I know not, Frederic ; but, whatever be your position, if you are such as I believe you—one whom I can reverence and honour—I am yours always!" exclaimed she, vehemently.

"If you love me, Catherine, as I would be loved, you place implicit trust in my word ; and those explanations I promised to satisfy the natural anxiety of your father are as nothing to you. Is it so, my beloved?"

"I believe you incapable of aught dishonourable."

"Then trust me, Catherine, when I solemnly tell you, a marriage with me will be no derogation to your high rank ; and that your father, should he survive to witness its avowal, will joyfully give us his sanction and blessing."

"Oh, if so, I entreat, conjure you, dissipate at once the mystery which surrounds you ; and then, with my father's consent, I may even now be yours before we leave for England," and her beautiful cheek glowed with eager expectation, as she glanced into his face.

"If you truly love me—if you trust me, Catherine, knowing that Lord Willingham gives his consent to our union on conditions I pledge you my sacred word shall be fulfilled, you will be mine without further pressing me to violate a solemn vow—a vow which ensures the personal safety, nay, perhaps, the life of another, and which binds me to secrecy on all concerning myself during the next six months. Think of the agony of our separation for so long a period—the period also of mourning for your dear father : during which, I could not comfort or console you ! Imagine the torment of knowing you far away from me, so young, so fair, beset with suitors, and I without a legal claim to silence their presumptuous hopes ! Dear Catherine, if you indeed love me, doom me not to such agonising suspense ! Let a secret tie now bind us——"

"I dare not. No, no ! Shall I give the right, the power, to any man living to draw me from my highest duty of consoling my dear father, and watching by his bed during the few hours which remain to him here ? Shall I be guilty of such treachery ?"

"Nay, hearken, Catherine : if you yield to my prayer, I solemnly promise you shall be free from wedded law until I publicly claim you as my bride."

Lady Catherine trembled violently. Mr. Randolph anxiously watched her. Suddenly she started from her seat, while every nerve quivered with excitement.

"This cannot be, Frederic !" exclaimed she with desperate courage. "I am the last of an ancient, a noble line ; it would be criminal—nay, worse than criminal—even believing you,

as I do, worthy, honourable, and akin to the noblest of my ancestors,—to give their honours to one unknown, and——”

“An adventurer, you would say, Lady Catherine Neville. Your own conscience shall now decide whether my test has not exposed the little sincerity of your affection. You do well, indeed, to refuse the suit of a man, in whose truth and integrity you have not the firmest confidence,” replied Mr. Randolph, haughtily.

“Forgive me. I meant not this!” exclaimed she.

“Catherine, dear Catherine, I love you too sincerely, too deeply, to urge you to any act prejudicial to your welfare,” said Mr. Randolph, as he fondly kissed the agitated brow of his betrothed. “I relied so much on my influence with you, and your affection for me, dearest, that—thinking at this critical period you would not refuse the protection of one chosen by yourself, and sanctioned by your father as your husband—I even presumed to make preparations for our instant marriage: my friend Mr. Clare—whom you may remember, Catherine—awaits us in the cathedral: which, though a Romish church, is still the temple of God. Let us go to him, dearest!”

“Tempt me not! I cannot—I dare not!” exclaimed Lady Catherine passionately, sinking again on the seat, while tears dropped fast on her white dress. She raised her eyes imploringly, and saw such an expression of keen reproach on her lover’s face, that she involuntarily buried her own in her hands.

“Catherine,” said he, at length, in low, earnest tones, “you distrust, reject, banish me from you! May you never wish the events of this evening recalled! Farewell. When I also visit England, perhaps it may be to find you the bride of another—of him, doubtless, whom you have probably now summoned to your aid.”

Astonishment, for a second, checked the sobs which shook Lady Catherine’s frame.

“Lord Alresford! You surely know he is engaged to another,” murmured she, faintly.

“Yet he loves you deeply, fervently, Lady Catherine.”

She shook her head incredulously.

“Perhaps you also deceive yourself as to your feelings towards him! Farewell, Catherine!” said Mr. Randolph, in low, mournful accents, as he folded her to his bosom, and pressed his lips to hers: they were cold as marble. He then replaced her on the bench, and after gazing on her a moment, moved away. She uttered a low cry—and his name burst from her lips. He was instantly at her side.

“Leave me not. I know not what I say or do. I am very miserable,” uttered she, in low unsteady tones, sweeping her

hand across her brow. "Frederic!" said she, earnestly, "this evening I swear to become yours—now tell me this mystery."

A bright smile of hope and exultation beamed on Mr. Randolph's face.

"A few months from this period, I will meet you again under your own roof of Wardour Court, to claim you openly; then you shall know all. Till then, let it suffice you, dearest, that I love you beyond the power of words to express! Now, my Catherine, as you have given yourself irrevocably to me, come—let us hasten, or Mrs. Otway will be alarmed at your long absence," exclaimed Mr. Randolph, hastily folding her shawl about her, and throwing his arm round her waist. Ere she had time for remonstrance or hesitation, he swiftly carried, rather than led her, through an aperture cut in the hedge, carefully hidden by straggling branches, and in a very brief space they stood before a low, narrow doorway, nearly concealed by one of the projecting buttresses of the magnificent cathedral of Narbonne.

"Stay, Frederic, stay!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, breathlessly, laying her hand upon Mr. Randolph's arm, already outstretched to push back the door—"one minute! What is your real—your true name?" and she darted a piercing look of inquiry into his face.

Mr. Randolph smiled: he fondly took the little hand resting so nervously on his arm, and carried it to his lips.

"Be at peace, dear one. Randolph is, indeed, my own, my true name. Why should you doubt it?"

"And the whole of it?" persisted Lady Catherine, very earnestly.

Mr. Randolph, apparently, did not hear her query; for at this moment the door yielded to his touch, and they stood within the majestic cathedral. The transepts and side aisles were enveloped in gloom, but the clear moonbeams shone through the rich painted windows, and chequered the marble pavement of the choir with luminous patches of crimson, amber, and blue. The bases of many of the columns dividing the nave from the aisles were also bathed in soft radiance, fitfully streaming up the fluted shafts, while the graceful pointed arches soaring one above the other were lost in shadowy obscurity, and the eye vainly sought to penetrate the gloomy vastness beyond. Lady Catherine stood gazing with a feeling of solemn awe. All around appeared wrapped in calm, immovable repose; and she involuntarily clung closer to her lover's arm, as their shadows glided mysteriously, swiftly, before them on the pavement, and the soft light trembled in strange relief on each marble statue in its sculptured niche as they passed.

"Would you fear, dearest, to await me here for a few brief

moments?" whispered Mr. Randolph, as they reached the high altar; and Lady Catherine sank on the steps overpowered with mingled awe, and secret apprehension.

She silently bowed her head, and Mr. Randolph vanished from her side. For a second or two she sat spell-bound where he left her; a kind of mysterious panic seemed gradually creeping over her senses, and she involuntarily shuddered, and hid her face in the folds of her shawl. Presently she threw it from her, and gazed nervously around. Beyond the choir all appeared a long, dark, interminable vista of gloom. Just before her, at a few yards distance, exactly before the high altar, arose a magnificent mausoleum of white marble. She arose and approached nearer. Around were bas-reliefs sculptured in marble, and the moon's rays rendered the figures strikingly prominent. The subject on which the artist appeared to have lavished so much skill, was a funeral cortège; the stately convoy, the train of mourners, male and female, in their long flowing mantles and hoods, the pompous funeral car, the blazing torches, were all depicted with vivid distinctness. On one side of the tomb was an inscription in large golden Gothic letters. Lady Catherine read in a gaze fascinated into steadiness—

"SEPULCRUM BONÆ MEMORIÆ
PHILIPPI,
QUONDAM FRANCORUM REGIS,
FILII BEATI LUDOVICI."

Upon the tomb lay a recumbent figure of the monarch. The moonbeams lighted up the features distinctly; but so calm and phantomlike did the pale effigy appear, bathed in the clustering rays, that she stood gazing upon it almost spell-bound.

Gradually her beautiful head sank on the tomb. A few minutes thus elapsed, and the Lady Catherine was roused from her painful reverie by the sound of approaching footsteps; and soon she discovered—she scarcely knew how, so rapid had been the transition—that her tears no longer flowed on the chill marble, but her cheek rested on the bosom of her lover, and Mr. Randolph's lips murmured words of love and encouragement in her ear.

"Catherine, my beloved! all is ready, and Mr. Clare awaits us. Come!"

"Oh, Frederic, Frederic! must this—must this really be? Do you, indeed, exact so fearful a proof of love?" exclaimed she, in low tones of extreme distress.

"Exact! no, Catherine. But is it possible a few brief moments have again shaken your confidence in me?" said Mr. Randolph, mournfully.

"No, no," murmured she hurriedly; "yet, strange thoughts flitted across me during your absence. My father——"

"Has given his consent: is it not so, my Catherine? therefore, we violate no duty by these our hasty espousals," exclaimed Mr. Randolph, once more throwing his arm round her.

Gently, though resolutely, he led her forwards, and in a few seconds they stood within a small chapel, brilliantly illumined by the glare of some half dozen torches. It was the chapel dedicated to St. Charles Borromeo—that holy and saintly bishop, who, during the awful pestilence in Milan, held his life cheap, so that he might win souls to God; and who, by his heavenly charity and priestly benediction, soothed the dying agonies of many a poor penitent, when even the majority of the priesthood, scared by the frightful mortality, fled from the devoted city, deserting their flocks, their bishop, and the few courageous brethren who nobly remained to share his fate, and aid his pious labours.

Lady Catherine threw a hasty, bewildered glance around. She perceived that, besides Mr. Clare, who had once been introduced to her before as a clergyman of the Church of England, and Mr. Randolph's former tutor, and travelling companion and friend, there were two or three persons present. Mr. Clare, arrayed in priestly vestments, hastily advanced towards them as they entered; he said something, but nearly sinking to the ground with agitation and excitement, she heard not its purport. Mr. Randolph hurriedly threw his arm round her, and motioning to Mr. Clare, led her to a low, square block of stone in the centre of the chapel, on which rested an open book. Soon, solemn words fell in low, emphatic accents from the lips of Mr. Clare. Lady Catherine, with her head bowed low, and her small hands clasped together, stood by, or rather leaned on him to whom she was about to vow unswerving fidelity. Not a tear moistened her eyes, and their long lashes rested on a cheek flushed, and burning with fevered agitation. Mechanically she repeated the words required of her; but not even at the voice of him she loved so well, did she venture to raise her eyes. The whole appeared a dream; her head swam, and the hot blood rushed to her brow. The words presently ceased:—a paper was laid before her, a pen placed between her trembling fingers, and she was told to write her name. His voice murmured the request; she instinctively obeyed, and it was all over. The Lady Catherine Neville, Lord Willingham's proud, beautiful heiress, had plighted her faith to one unknown!

Gradually, then, the vivid colour faded from her cheek, as she fell back into Mr. Randolph's arms; her fair head drooped, and she fainted.

When Lady Catherine revived, she found herself on the same rustic bench in the garden which she had sought on quitting Mrs. Otway ; then, little thinking, in the lightness of her heart, as she tripped so joyously along the orange-bowered walk, that the following hour was to be the hour of her destiny : the hour which would colour all her future ones ; the harbinger of weal or woe ; of bliss to come, or of misery irretrievable. A gentle breeze had sprung up, and the soft night wind murmured, and crept with rustling sound amid the beautiful foliage, and wafted around the delicious perfume of the rich southern vegetation.

And she lay in her husband's arms and wept : wept as if her whole heart would dissolve itself in tears.

The cathedral clock struck eleven. They had just been absent half an hour from the garden.

Lady Catherine started.

"Mrs. Otway will be seeking me. Dear Frederic, you must suffer me to say farewell ! Indeed, I need repose. Think of the wearing anxiety of the last four months," exclaimed she falteringly, striving to disengage herself from his arms.

"One moment longer, Catherine, my own—my wife ! Listen ! I must see you secretly and frequently after your return to England. Will you promise, by the love you have vowed, that when you receive the remaining portion of this clasp, you will meet me wherever I indicate ?" and Mr. Randolph hastily passed round the slender throat of his bride a thin gold chain. Appended to it was a small circular clasp, in fashion resembling the ancient Roman fibula, or brooch, richly studded with diamonds and sapphires. In the centre, Mr. Randolph's cipher was wrought in jewels : but between the initial letters, so as to divide them exactly in the middle, was a tiny medallion of fine blue enamel, surrounded by a wreath of diamonds, bearing the single letter "C."

"Indeed, dear Frederic, I promise faithfully. It will be the only consolation left to me," murmured Lady Catherine, as Mr. Randolph divided the clasp. She hastily hid the part hanging to the chain in her bosom ; and they moved slowly towards the house.

"You will stay and see dear papa?" said Lady Catherine hesitatingly, raising her earnest eyes to his face.

"Certainly, my love. I will go with you and shake hands with Mrs Otway this evening, and to-morrow I hope to see Lord Willingham."

"And, Frederic, I have another thing to mention," said Lady Catherine, pausing suddenly, and blushing. "I shall be obliged to write and summon Lord Alresford hither immediately. Papa is continually asking for him ; and Mrs. Otway reminded me of it this evening."

A slight, a very slight shadow darkened Mr. Randolph's handsome brow.

"Lord Alresford is your father's executor, Catherine, I believe. Summon him then, dearest, if you judge it necessary," said he, after a pause.

They had now nearly reached the house: a clump of shrubs and evergreens, around which the walk wound, separated them only from the steps of the balcony. All at once he heard of Mrs. Otway's shrill voice, summoning the Lady Catherine in more agitating accents than was her wont, smote on their ear, as they still lingered arm-in-arm, unwilling to suffer ought to interrupt the deep happiness which filled their hearts.

"Mrs. Otway!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, darting forwards. On the steps she met her friend. "Here I am, dear Mrs. Otway. Oh! what is it? Tell me—quick!"

"Oh, nothing very urgent, my dear. Nay, Catherine, pray do not frighten yourself, my dearest love," exclaimed the old lady, imploringly: though she appeared herself very fluttered and uncomfortable.

"My father!"

"Well, I see I had best tell you at once. Dr. Gordon, my dear, considers within this last hour a most unfavourable change has taken place in your father's condition; and he thinks Lord Alresford ought to be sent for immediately. Shall I write, my dear, whilst you go to Lord Willingham? You will find a sad, sad change. Oh! my Catherine, what a troublesome world this is of ours!" said kind Mrs. Otway, while tears slowly streamed down her cheeks.

Lady Catherine did not utter a sound, but sank against the balustrade.

"Bless me! Mr. Randolph! Is it possible?" suddenly cried Mrs. Otway, starting forwards and looking as if she harboured a strong suspicion she was addressing some supernatural visitant.

"Yes, 'tis I indeed, Mrs. Otway; and, though unexpected, I trust not the less welcome."

"Indeed, Mr. Randolph, we are truly glad to see you," said the old lady, advancing, and extending her hand; "though I fear, under our present circumstances, we can but give you a mournful welcome. Ah, I perceive what has detained that dear child out so late, until her cheek rivals the lily," added she, watching Lady Catherine's wavering colour and languid eye.

The door of the sitting-room here sharply opened, and Dr. Gordon appeared.

"Mrs. Otway, where is Lady Catherine Neville? She ought to be immediately informed of the very serious alteration in his lordship's condition," said he, hurriedly, disappearing again.

Lady Catherine instantly arose.

"To-morrow," murmured she, as Mr. Randolph for a second bent over her and pressed her hand in his. "But you will not be far, if—if—" her pale lip quivered, and she hastily quitted the room.

Twenty-four hours elapsed, and Lord Willingham was dead.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE START TO FERNLY.

"WHAT a nuisance a wet day is in the country! Do you think it will clear up, Sir Gerard?" exclaimed Miss Effingham, strolling towards one of the windows before taking her seat at the breakfast table, on the day but one following her walk in the park with her betrothed.

"The morning does not certainly look very promising as yet, but I see a feeble gleam to the right yonder, over that fir plantation, which appears as if the sun were lingering but for a favourable moment to drive these provoking clouds away: so I think there is hope yet," replied Sir Gerard, approaching the window, and gazing out also on the dreary morning.

The rain fell in swift, bright drops on the large panes: and the wind, with gusty murmur, swayed here and there the green boughs, and piteously tossed the beautiful shrubs on the smooth lawn, fresh and verdant from the torrents which had fallen in the night as during the earliest days of spring. The air was warm, and fragrant with the refreshing vapour steaming from the heated, parched earth, and a thick, drizzling kind of mist hung over the lake and the distant glades and avenues of the park. In short, never did morning of more unpromising aspect dawn, and gentle Lady Elvaston, though she loved the blue sky and bright sun as well, or better, than most people, never felt more thankful in her life than when she first awoke and heard the wind blow, and the rain drip and patter; while Aglaë, in answer to her eager queries on the state of the elements, when she came to open the bed-room shutters, replied,—

"Ah, milédi, il fait vraiment un temps affreux! C'est une matinée a faire peur,—quite an English morning—wet, dreary, and dismal."

"Such a contrast to the last three or four beautiful days," moaned Mildred, still at the window.

Sir Gerard appeared highly amused at her despairing accents.

"I am sure Miss Tennyson ought to be highly flattered at the interest you take in her picnic—or what shall I call it? If she carries her friends off to Fernly this dripping day, I hope her conscience may not be burdened by their rheumatic pains and aches, as I feel mine to be by the sufferings of your pretty friend, Helen Campbell. I must run down to Greysdon, as soon as breakfast is over, and try and make my peace with Mrs. Campbell."

"It really was very thoughtless of you, Sir Gerard, to keep her out so late in the boat the other evening, without even the protection of an extra wrapper. Poor Helen is as hoarse as a raven this morning, and was so feverish besides last night, that I began to be seriously uncomfortable."

"You do not surely mean to tell me Miss Campbell is worse this morning?" exclaimed Sir Gerard, with considerable anxiety expressed on his handsome, good-humoured face.

"No,—on the contrary, I am rejoiced to say she is decidedly better. I have just been to see her, and have given her leave to come down stairs by lunch time; so pray do not look so unhappy, Sir Gerard; but when she makes her appearance do your best to show your contrition by making yourself as useful and agreeable to our dear invalid as possible," said Mildred, laughing.

"You shall see what a capital nurse I can make. But you are placing monstrous confidence in my honour: for if you render the punishment so very pleasant, I fear I shall be sorely tempted to repeat my offence. Miss Campbell is so very good natured and amiable."

"Good natured and amiable! I have a great mind to quarrel with you seriously, Sir Gerard, for using such very commonplace terms in your commendation of my friend. Helen Campbell is an angel: and as good as she is pretty and refined!" exclaimed Mildred.

"And I am sure, also, she has a noble, generous-hearted friend; which is a boon that falls to few," rejoined Sir Gerard warmly.

"See, there is a little break in the clouds yonder, and they appear altogether less dense and compact: a gloomy morning is often followed by a sunshiny day. I shall be so delighted for Clara Tennyson's sake, who would be woefully disappointed at the failure of this riding party; especially as she did not see you when she called, Sir Gerard," said Mildred, blushing.

"But you know I must stay at home and nurse Miss Campbell, *malgré* the regrets of the divine Clara!"

"You will have your revenge, Sir Gerard: for, luckily, Mildred must likewise stay and aid you, of course, since this rainy morning puts the Fernly expedition quite out of the question. But, my dear Mildred, breakfast is quite ready. I wish you would take your post and pour out the coffee," said Lady Elvaston.

"Clara will never give up the expedition for this slight rain, mamma; the clouds are breaking, and I predict we shall have glorious sunshine at noon," said Miss Effingham, casting one lingering look over the misty landscape, as she slowly moved from the window. "Think how splendid the old trees behind the Abbey will look, glistening with raindrops! and how romantic it will be! Clara will be in raptures!" exclaimed she, with a light laugh.

"Oh, doubtless she will: you should add also Miss Effingham, when all her party stand huddled together in a picturesque group, wet to the skin. The ladies, with their veils and fair ringlets dabbled in rain, and the ground sinking like a bog at every step! How charming to alight and perambulate, umbrella in hand, the grassy courts and cloisters of the Abbey!"

"Really, Sir Gerard, you always contrive to draw such ridiculous pictures," said Mildred, with a laugh; though Sir Gerard fancied it was not so unconstrained as usual. "You know very well we need be reduced to none of these deplorable straits. Could we not have the carriage, mamma, to follow us to the Abbey in case of any desperate extremity?"

Lady Elvaston hesitated: she had never been in the habit of opposing or offering any impediment to the wishes of her only and idolised child; but now she felt herself waxing strong in opposition to a scheme which would again throw her darling Mildred into the society of the fascinating Colonel Sutherland.

"Certainly, my dear Mildred, the carriage is at your disposal: but, indeed, I cannot consent to your endangering your precious health by this foolish project of Clara Tennyson's. I shall, therefore, write a note immediately after breakfast, and despatch it to Settringham with your excuses, my love," replied Lady Elvaston, firmly.

Mildred's colour rose: she continued sipping her coffee; but there lurked a calm determination in her eye, which did not escape the notice of Sir Gerard Baynton, who was sitting beside her.

"Clara Tennyson has always some ridiculous fancies and schemes. Poor girl! she thinks they make her of importance. But it is quite out of the question your thinking of going to-day, Mildred. I cannot conceive what novelty you find in these ruins. I believe I have ridden with you there some

hundred times ; so, my dear Milly, do not distress us by talking about it more," exclaimed Lord Elvaston, looking up from his paper.

"But, dearest papa, I promised Clara so very faithfully ; and, see, the weather is clearing, and the sun actually struggling down to dry up this deluge. We shall have such a delightful ride. Pray, let me go!" exclaimed Mildred, caressingly, in those tones her indulgent father could never resist ; while Lady Elvaston, finding her daughter had formed one of her energetic resolves, ceased to offer any very strenuous opposition.

"Come, Alresford, your coffee and grill will be cold before you have finished the perusal of that heap of letters. I hope you have good news from Wardour Court of your pretty ward, Lady Catherine Neville?" said Lord Elvaston, addressing the earl ; who, since the arrival of the post-bag, leant in the embrasure of the opposite window to that where Mildred had stationed herself, busily reading his numerous letters. Sir Gerard fancied—though, to be sure, he might be mistaken—that his friend, for reasons known only to himself, found more interest in watching the actions of the fair young girl before him, than in the delicate closely-written pages in his hand.

"Thank you ; Lady Catherine is quite well ; though she writes in depressed spirits, for her friend Mrs. Otway has been seriously indisposed," replied Lord Alresford, pushing aside his letters, and taking the vacant chair near Lady Elvaston. "I really must apologise for my inattention, Lady Elvaston."

"Pray, do not think that necessary."

"May I now inquire, Mildred, what this expedition is, on which you appear so steadfastly resolved?" said Lord Alresford, with a smile, rising and bringing his cup to her.

Mildred did not, could not speak. She silently filled the cup, and hastily withdrew her fair hand, as it momentarily came in contact with that of her betrothed. There could now no longer be any reasonable doubt as to the earl's intimate *liaison* with the mistress of Wardour Court. They corresponded ! The hand of Lady Catherine had filled those miniature sheets of paper with lines written closely and finely, as with the pen of a fairy. Who could pretend now to deny their intimacy ? No, not even her sceptical friend Helen Campbell !

Meanwhile, the day was clearing. The heavy clouds burst, and rolled gradually away, and the damp grey mist vanished. First, one little gleam of sunshine rested on the summit of the distant hills, then another fell aslant on the dull, angry looking water of the lake. Presently a tiny morsel of the most luminous azure peeped from beneath the dense leaden expanse above ; another few minutes, and the bright beams struggled

and poured downwards, and the pale blue sky became dappled by fleecy masses, which sailed onwards and onwards, until they dissolved in the clear ether. As Mildred predicted, the heavens by noon bade fair to be a perfect blaze of splendour—and *she* was more resolved than ever on her expedition.

"Look, look, mamma! I told you we should still bask in another lovely day," cried she, triumphantly, trying to evade Lord Alresford's question, pointing to a brilliant ray which fell that instant on the crimson Bohemian glass on the breakfast table.

"The day appears to have taken a most unexpected turn, my love; but still I believe you will find it very damp and disagreeable amongst the ruins: and Fernly is so shaded by trees. But, Mildred, if you are resolved to go, have you requested Lord Alresford's escort? for you cannot ride alone, my dear, and I fear your father has other engagements this morning," said Lady Elvaston, determined upon making another effort.

Lord Alresford repeated his question; and this time Sir Gerard Baynton answered:—

"The state of the case is this: Miss Effingham fears to be moped to death in the house, doomed to the society of two such very unentertaining companions as you and I; and therefore, in spite of the elements, insists on joining a party to Fernly Abbey, planned by that very enterprising young lady Miss Tennyson. Now Alresford, you are quite *au fait* in the matter."

"Although I think it very unreasonable of you, Mildred, not to yield to your mother's wishes, and defer the ride until a more propitious day; yet if you have any especial motive for joining Miss Tennyson's party, I shall have great pleasure in accompanying you," said Lord Alresford gently, fixing his earnest eyes on her face.

Mildred blushed, and turned away with an uncomfortable sensation at her heart. Especial motive! Had she not only one little week to decide on the most momentous event of her life! And three days were already expired!

Ah, Mildred—Mildred! Why were you like those foolish ones who blindly reject the good, the happiness, God invariably places sometime in his children's path, in search of that vague chimera imagination always pictures, though never realises?

Mildred's principles, however, were too upright, too honourable, to permit her to accept the offer of the earl's escort, knowing what her secret object in the expedition was: but this, again, involved her in fresh perplexity.

"I fear the morning is rather damp and unpleasant for those who have lately been accustomed to a more genial

climate, therefore, I should be so very sorry to force you to this gallop over our bleak hills," said she, hesitatingly. "I dare say Archibald Campbell is going—though are you quite sure, dear papa, you could not spare me this afternoon?"

"Quite impossible, my dear Mildred. I am going to ride to Harlington to transact business with my bailiff," replied Lord Elvaston, abruptly.

Lord Alresford instinctively perceived some mystery lurked behind Mildred's embarrassment.

"And of whom does this party consist?" asked he, coldly.

"Of the Settringham family, Miss Vincent, Mr. and Mrs. Farnleigh, Mr. Frank Norwood, Colonel Sutherland, Captain Vansittart, Mr. Archibald Campbell, and some others whom I forget," replied Lady Elvaston, promptly: for from the very first day of the earl's arrival she had wisely resolved that no reserve, no mystery, on her part, should shield her daughter's movements from the observation of the man she so earnestly wished to see her united to; and *his* respect, and *her* influence were thereby increased tenfold.

"Sir Gerard, I suppose you, at least, intend to go," said Miss Effingham, after a pause, rising, with heightened colour, from the breakfast table.

"Yes, certainly, if I am back from Greysdon in time. You remember, I have first to call on Mrs. Campbell with a bulletin of her daughter's health. I will set off immediately. Alresford, you will ride with us?"

"I must beg to be excused. I have letters to write which will not admit of delay," replied the earl, frigidly.

And Mildred felt that the better understanding and greater cordiality subsisting between them since their evening walk, had vanished.

"Well, Milly, remember I neither sanction nor approve of this expedition. I think it a most confounded foolish affair: just as if people cannot eat their luncheon quietly and comfortably at home, instead of sitting shivering and shaking under some damp hedge, and giving themselves all manner of pains and aches. Mind, if you will be so silly, I absolutely lay my strict veto that you shall not sit down on the grass," grumbled Lord Elvaston, throwing aside the newspaper. "Don't you think she would be much better at home, Alresford?"

"It is impossible to give an opinion. Mildred must be the best judge of how far her promise to join this party will be considered binding," replied the earl, calmly.

"Nay, but dear papa, I will be so very, very careful: do not be alarmed. I will wrap myself up so well, and Aglaë, to please you, shall send goloshes, and all kinds of safeguards against wind and rain: only you must not look so grave, and

shake your head as though you thought that, instead of enjoying a good bracing canter, I was about to rush into some terrible danger," exclaimed Mildred, pausing behind her father's chair, and throwing her arms round his neck, while her pretty eyes smiled and beamed lovingly on his.

"You little sorceress!" said Lord Elvaston, fondly patting her cheek. "After all, I believe I shall be obliged to ride with you, and take care of you myself."

"Oh, papa, it will be so very, very kind of you."

"But mind if I go, Mildred, no persuasion on earth shall induce me to touch a particle of her ladyship's nonsensical *dejeuner*: and I must be home again by three."

"Very well, papa. We are to join the party at the ruins. I wrote to Clara yesterday, begging her not to call for me, as it was uncertain when we should be able to set out. Now I must go and talk with Helen," exclaimed Miss Effingham, bounding from the room.

About half an hour afterwards, ready equipped for her excursion, she entered poor Helen's darkened chamber.

"Well, my darling Helen, how do you feel after breakfast? I am come to have just half an hour's chat with you, before we set off for Fernly. I trust Aglaë has been very attentive, and brought you everything you could wish?" said Mildred, sinking into a chair by the bedside, and tossing her riding-hat nonchalantly from her head—much to the detriment of the smooth braids which Aglaë, taking into consideration the humid state of the atmosphere, had substituted for her usual flowing curls.

"I am much better, and have made a most excellent breakfast. And so you are going to Fernly, dearest," continued she, in a tone of regret. "I heard a most deplorable account of the weather—do pray, draw the curtain, and let me judge for myself."

Mildred arose, and did as she was requested.

"See, it has turned out quite a bright, lovely morning; not at all too hot to make a ride of seven miles uncomfortable. But Helen, I am so pleased you are better; and so will Sir Gerard Baynton be also, I will answer for it. You have no idea how miserable he seemed about you this morning: and so penitent for having persuaded you to stay out late on the water. Ah, my dear imprudent, demure Helen, I foresee now, I shall soon have to lecture you on the impropriety of aiming such sudden darts, looking all the time so modest and prettily behaved."

"Really, Mildred, you are too absurd! Sir Gerard is very good-natured, and appears ready to be obliging and kind to everybody," said Helen, blushing a very little.

"Yes, and you will have such a charming mother-in-law to

guide you in your duties at the Chauntry," continued Mildred, laughing. "Lady Emily is everything a woman of rank ought to be, you know; and measured by the earl's standard, she cannot fall far short of angelic perfection. I generally remark, Helen—and I will say it in spite of your blushes—that when people begin to find out they are mutually amiable, good-natured, and agreeable, they end at last in discovering multitudes of other good and charming qualities."

"Do they?" cried Helen, smiling. "Now, Mildred, I can fairly turn the tables. You remember you told me the other day, how very amiable and agreeable you found the earl during your *tête-à-tête*: now, mind, I shall look to you to work out your own prophecy. But to be serious, who rides with you this morning to Fernly?"

"Papa, Sir Gerard, and Archibald, constitute my staff, Helen," replied Mildred, turning away her head.

"And not Lord Alresford? Oh, Mildred, think what effect this continued defiance of his wishes must at length produce! Tell me, did you not ask him to ride with you? or how did it happen?"

"The truth is, Helen, when he offered me his escort, my conscience would not allow me promptly to accept of it, knowing I was deliberately seeking an interview with a man whom he disapproves. Mamma afterwards mentioned that Colonel Sutherland was amongst Sir Richard's guests, and then his lordship coldly and decisively declined to be of the party; and now all is dark between us: dark as ever!" exclaimed Mildred, colouring.

"Mildred," said Helen earnestly, "give up this party. What can it signify to Lord Alresford's betrothed wife to sound Colonel Sutherland's sentiments? If he has been trifling with you, why voluntarily submit to the humiliation of listening to such an avowal? and if his passion is sincere, consider, as you tell me you are firmly resolved on fulfilling your engagement, what additional struggles you doom yourself to encounter, when——"

"Cease, Helen! I am firmly resolved to ascertain this day, whether I have been the sport, the toy of an unprincipled man, or the object of a sincere, long-suppressed passion. It may be foolish,—it may be rash, but I am determined! and if it proves to be the former, what a lesson,—what a warning will it be to me through life: one more effectual than all the earl's exhortations!" exclaimed Mildred, vehemently, her lips becoming very pale.

"But should he profess the latter, Mildred, what then?"

"Then, at least, I shall have the consolation of knowing I am not the poor dupe you, Helen, and all the rest of the world imagine," replied Mildred, smiling bitterly.

"I know, while you are in this mood, it is vain to argue the point any longer, Mildred, so I will forbear," said Helen, sorrowfully, sinking back on her pillow.

"If I resist persuasion from your lips, Helen, you must feel how necessary it is to my happiness to have this point cleared up: and, Helen, perhaps 'tis of no less vital consequence to the earl also; should the result prove that he can honourably stand clear of his engagement to a girl to whom he even did not think it requisite to announce his intended arrival at her father's house. Who knows but that in his next letter to Wardour Court, in reply to the long one he received this morning, he may announce joyous tidings to the Lady Catherine Neville."

"Excuse me, Mildred, but I know in your heart you do not believe a syllable of what you have just said," replied Helen, calmly. "If Lord Alresford were desirous of offering his hand to Lady Catherine, a single word would release him from his engagements to your family: he could not hesitate, on the score of your affection being compromised, as your manner, whether assumed or not, must soon satisfy him on this point. But, Mildred, I am also certain, if Lord Alresford does not offer Lady Catherine's letter for your perusal it will be your own fault."

"Oh, if I could believe so!" murmured Mildred, tears springing to her eyes.

"Only try, Mildred. What did Lord Alresford say the other evening—'Only let me respect my wife'—well, force him to do so! Is it not worth a trial? Can you compare Colonel Sutherland to him in intellect, worth, honourable feeling, personal appearance—in fact, anything?"

"All this is true—perfectly—I cannot deny it!" murmured Mildred, covering her face with both her hands.

Miss Effingham did not speak again for some moments.

"If I go astray, Helen, dearest, after your admonitions, I shall, indeed, deserve all the penalties it may entail; but go I must to-day, and meet Sutherland. Nay, do not look so grave, Helen, it shall be the last time I grieve your heart: and if I find he has trifled with me—if the report of his engagement be correct, —"

"You will then learn to love Lord Alresford, who has been so true in his attachment, as sincerely as your imagination is now smitten by the colonel's worthless flatteries," interposed Helen.

"Would you wish me so miserable, Helen, as to love without the chance of such a return as would alone satisfy me? But how selfish I have been, talking and exciting you in this manner! and how bad your cough seems. I will ring immediately and prescribe a dose of *ipecacuanha*. Let me ar-

range these pillows more comfortably—try this way, darling : there, now your head looks as if it rested more easily. When Aglaë comes, I must say adieu, for I hear the horses are brought round to the hall-door, and dear papa grows always impatient if I am not punctual to a second. Here she comes !”

Aglaë was the bearer of a very urgent message from Lord Elvaston, admonishing his daughter that it was more than a quarter past the time she had fixed to set off ; and, after some moments spent in the necessary readjustment of her toilette, Mildred descended to the drawing-room.

Lady Elvaston received in silence her daughter's parting embrace ; as, to confess the strict truth, she felt thoroughly indignant. Mildred timidly paused one very brief second as she passed the couch on which Lord Alresford quietly lounged, absorbed in a new publication that morning received from town ; but as his lordship did not vouchsafe to raise his very handsome eyes from his book, or to manifest any token that he was aware of her presence, she hurriedly quitted the room.

Lady Elvaston arose, and approached the window.

“I cannot express how this strange, wayward infatuation of Mildred's pains and grieves me ! It is so inexcusable—so utterly unlike her !” said she in a voice of deep feeling, as the party cantered by.

Lord Alresford flung aside his book.

“Dear Lady Elvaston, we must have patience. Let us hope her own good sense and rectitude of principle, will at last explain that which now appears so inconsistent and reprehensible,” said he, taking her hand.

His words and manner were gentle, and kind.

Lady Elvaston sighed.

CHAPTER IX.

MILDRED'S DREAM DISPELLED.

AND a pleasant ride they had through green lanes and over smooth verdant meadows, all reeking with the growing moisture of a soft summer rain ; for the road to the ruins of Fernly Abbey lay across flowery fields and bypaths, and sometimes between tall, thick hedges, where the way was so very narrow as scarcely to suffer two horsemen to ride abreast. There is something wondrously exhilarating in this exercise of riding. To a light, happy spirit it affords rich revel indeed to bound freely through the elastic air, inhaling the pure, clear element on a sunshiny day, when the birds sing, and the blue sky stretching over a smiling, joyous landscape ; but there is also to the heart depressed by worldly anxiety and care, an excitement in the quick transit which elates—something which circulates the blood, and revives the languid energies : something in the murmurs of the fresh, bracing breeze that whispers of hope, and of a time when He who created so fair and mysterious a world for the enjoyment of his fallen creatures, shall at length render all within man as harmonious, shall bind up the wounds of the broken in spirit, and make the waste places of the heart glad with abundant consolation.

And so it was with Mildred Effingham : though, we fear, most of her friends would exclaim, that, at any rate, she did not feel troubled at, but rather gloried in her delinquencies. But if such was their thought, they decidedly wronged her ; for no generous-hearted, high-principled girl, could act directly counter to the advice and known wishes of her dearest friends, however right she might conceive herself to be, without being conscious of a very profound and uncomfortable feeling of sadness, lurking in the hidden recesses of her spirit. And Mildred did feel very miserable as she mounted her horse : the tears glittered in her beautiful eyes, which she had great difficulty in repressing ; but as the buoyant air fanned her cheek, and fluttered amid the folds of her veil, the sensation abated.

On they sped, now on the soft yielding turf, then on the crisp gravel, but neither Miss Effingham nor her father seemed inclined to enter into the animated dialogue going forwards between Sir Gerard Baynton and Archibald Campbell. Mildred felt a spell hang heavily on her usual lively spirits—perhaps it might be the remembrance of the kind mother at home, grieving over her wilful perversity. The hedges spread, and

displayed all the wild luxuriance of a brilliant June morning. Here and there huge bushes of white and pink dog-roses shot forth vigorous branches, twining insidiously around the stunted stems of the thorn, and drooping showers of pink blossoms and verdant foliage on the mossy bank beneath. The sun, ere they arrived in sight of the ruins, had well nigh dried up every particle of water, and everything looked so fresh and glowing, that even Lord Elvaston was brought to confess, that weather more propitious for the thorough enjoyment of a country ride could not be desired; though he sturdily refused to extend his concession to the unlucky pic-nic, or to pic-nics in general: which he obstinately averred were foolish things in this climate, at all times and in all seasons: and perhaps he was right.

"Well, Milly, here we are; but I do not at present perceive any of her ladyship's fantastical preparations," said Lord Elvaston, as they wound along the narrow bridle-path down to the ruins.

"Her ladyship knows better than to choose so exposed a site as any you can now see. The *dejeuner*, I suppose, will be spread in the hollow behind the Abbey, sheltered by the clump of elm trees; or in what will please you better, papa, as you are so very romantically inclined this morning, in Queen Mary's Chamber," replied Mildred, laughingly.

"Queen Mary's fiddlesticks!" growled Lord Elvaston, in tones half grumpy, half amused.

"And there stands the fair Clara, waving her handkerchief to us," exclaimed Sir Gerard, spurring his horse to Mildred's side, and directing her attention to Miss Tennyson; who stood with several ladies high above, gazing down from a ruined window, surrounded by a large party of gentlemen. "See, Miss Effingham, yonder also sits Lady Tennyson, on a camp stool, with a carriage mat under her feet, looking as chill and miserable as if she were doing penance! I see she is talking to Colonel Sutherland."

"Mad, mad! she positively must be crazy. An old woman to be betrayed into such absurdity!" said Lord Elvaston, bursting into a fit of laughter, as Lady Tennyson, with Colonel Sutherland's assistance, unfurled and hoisted a pale rose-coloured parasol.

At this moment a couple of grooms came forward to lead away the horses, and after a slight demur Lord Elvaston reluctantly dismounted, and giving his arm to his daughter, proceeded to the spot where Lady Tennyson sat. She arose as they approached, but carefully avoided trespassing beyond the borders of the mat.

"How do you do, Lord Elvaston? I am sure I need not put that question to you, Miss Effingham, for I never re-

member seeing you look better. Sir Gerard Baynton, I am delighted to see you—you will find my son yonder," exclaimed Lady Tennyson, pointing with the delicate ivory handle of her parasol. "He and Frank Norwood are engaged in deciding a bet, whether the ditches at the last Boxton Steeplechase were as wide as the Abbey moat. Good-morning, Mr. Campbell: it is really very kind of you all to come this damp morning."

"Damp enough; and I fear you find the wind rather keen, also, Lady Tennyson, for you look very pinched and chill," said Lord Elvaston, drily, bowing coldly to Colonel Sutherland.

"Do I? Now, really, if I could just trouble you, Mr. Archibald Campbell, to step to the carriage, and fetch my large sable pelisse. Daughters in these days, Lord Elvaston, are not sufficiently thoughtful for their parents' comfort; and there is Clara yonder, who never dreams it possible I can be the worse for all this humid vapour. Miss Effingham!"—but Mildred, a few steps from her irritable ladyship, was talking to the colonel, and did not at first hear. "Colonel Sutherland," continued Lady Tennyson, peevishly, "in olden days, you positively would have been indicted for sorcery, as you always contrive to attract and monopolise a young lady's undivided attention. I was going to inquire, Miss Effingham, after the health of the Earl of Alresford."

"Lord Alresford is perfectly well, I believe, Lady Tennyson," replied Mildred, with heightened colour.

"His lordship's time must be very precious now. I know, before my darling Jemima's marriage, Mr. Macpherson was wholly occupied with his correspondence, and in penning lengthy effusions to his man of business. All may be *couleur de rose* during the courtship, to the young bride elect, you know my dear Lord Elvaston, as she is supposed to be ignorant of these various little negotiations; but to us parents all the *ennui* of settlements, pin-money, &c., mar, in no small degree, the pleasing excitement of a wedding," said Lady Tennyson, complacently.

Mildred coloured, and Colonel Sutherland and the gentlemen around could not repress a smile; for, despite Lady Tennyson's boasting, it was notorious that her darling Jemima's husband, Mr. Macpherson, depended for his yearly income on the favourable balance in his betting-books.

"How does your sister like her horse, Campbell?" asked Colonel Sutherland, to change the conversation.

"Helen appears highly delighted, and manages beautifully: she would have been here to-day but for a bad cold, which rendered it impossible for her to ride this morning."

"For which she may thank that foolish fellow," exclaimed

Lord Elvaston, pointing to Sir Gerard, "who insisted on rowing her on the lake until near midnight."

"Indeed!" rejoined Lady Tennyson, quickly; "I did not know you were so enthusiastic, Sir Gerard. We have a splendid sheet of water at Settringham, which I hope, as you are fond of rowing, may be an inducement to you to give us the pleasure of your company for a few days."

"You do me great honour, Lady Tennyson. But when my visit to the Priory is ended, it is very uncertain where destiny may transport me," replied Sir Gerard.

"I trust then your stay at the Priory may be much prolonged, for we cannot spare you, Sir Gerard, when all our beaux and belles are flying from the neighbourhood. Do you know, Colonel Sutherland, I even heard the other day that the —Dragoons were ordered from Staunmore to some outlandish place in the Highlands. I suppose it was but a report after all?"

"Our case, Lady Tennyson, is not quite so lamentable, though provoking enough," rejoined Colonel Sutherland. "We are under marching orders for Edinburgh; but you may fancy how keen must be our regret to quit a place where we have met with so much kindness and hospitality. I can honestly vouch some of the happiest hours of my life have been spent in M—shire," continued he, lowering his voice, until to Mildred's ear was it alone audible.

"Although the regiment may be ordered away, I trust Colonel Sutherland has made no resolve to reject the invitations of his old friends, and that we shall still frequently welcome him in this neighbourhood, said Lady Tennyson, smiling blandly. "Oh! I am charmed this foolish wager is decided, for I see Sir Richard coming towards us," continued her ladyship, half rising, as her son and his friend appeared.

"But then the fairest flower will no more be seen! Is it not wise, Miss Effingham, to avoid places and reminiscences which can but recall too vividly a time of exquisite happiness, vanished for ever?" murmured Colonel Sutherland in Mildred's ear.

Can this be the language of a man plighte to another? thought Mildred.

"It depends whether those reminiscences are such as conscience approves," replied she nevertheless, promptly.

"Well, Dick, who has won? Indeed, you must both have been deep in argument not to perceive Miss Effingham's presence," exclaimed Lady Tennyson, as the young men approached.

"I most humbly apologise, Miss Effingham," said Sir Richard, hastening forwards; "but you see, those confounded

elder bushes completely concealed this spot. How is Lady Elvaston, and your friend Miss Campbell?"

"Mamma is well; but I cannot give so good an account of Helen, who is laid up with a bad cold."

"I am sorry to hear it. Frank, if your spine has recovered its flexibility since that terrible shock at the Boxton steeplechase, and you can do honour to my introduction by an elegant bow, I will beg permission to present you to Miss Effingham. Miss Effingham, may I introduce my friend, Frank Norwood, of Chartleigh?"

Mr. Frank Norwood inclined so profoundly, as to set at rest all doubt anyone present might feel as to the perfect elasticity of his vertebrae.

"But I am dying to know how you have decided that bet, Dick," interposed Lady Tennyson.

"Well, mother, as it seemed impossible to come to any decision, we resolved to despatch Bob Higgins to Settringham to fetch the horses; so Spankaway and Black Bess may have at it presently. I am so glad you are here, Miss Effingham; it will be a piece of rare sport. But the best of it is, mother, Frank swears his groom is lighter than Bob; who I proposed should be our jockey."

"I am surprised at Mr. Norwood. I should say Bob was several stone the lighter, replied Lady Tennyson, decisively, delighted her darling son had at last found something sufficiently novel to kindle his interest.

"Well, Lady Tennyson, while these young gentlemen discuss their jockeys and bets, I propose that you and I take a gentle stroll through the ruins; unless, indeed, as I strongly recommend, you take up a position amongst the cushions of your carriage, as the most comfortable you can command here," said Lord Elvaston.

"To tell you the truth, I think I have never fully recovered that sad jumble between Settringham and Stanmore in Dick's phaeton; so I think I will take your advice, my dear lord, if you will be good enough to give me your arm. See! here comes Clara," and Lady Tennyson arose languidly, and stepped from the mat as if she were about to place her toe on a red-hot ploughshare.

"My dear Mildred, I am so enchanted to see you! I was quite sure you might be relied upon, though mamma prophesied you would not come," cried Miss Tennyson, bounding forwards, followed by two or three ladies dressed *à l'Amazone*. "After all it was such a very slight shower, and one might be ever poking in the house if such *contretemps* were suffered to break up one's projects. Well, Sir Gerard, you have never been over to Settringham to see my pointers; but I suppose men are alike, and all their promises resemble cobwebs, which

the first breath of wind dissipates. La! mamma," continued Miss Tennyson, as her eye rested on her mother's muffled figure, "how can you wrap yourself up in that fur pelisse this broiling day! You look exactly like the old Nabob of Dornton—I beg your pardon, my dear Caroline—when he came home from Calcutta, crawling like a huge beetle under all his cloaks and wrappers."

"Your mother, like a sensible person, is going to sit quietly in her carriage until you are wearied of your rambles in the wet woods. But I should like to know, Miss Clara, now you have taken the trouble of bringing us all together, what the deuce it is you intend us to do?" said Lord Elvaston, quaintly.

"Do! My dear Lord Elvaston, you are always so droll. I hope—after you have enjoyed this beautiful fresh air, and climbed the hill yonder, which is really worth your while to do, to look at the windings of the swollen river in the valley—you will ride back with us to Settringham; as I really could not gainsay the fact, that it was too damp and wet a day to dream of a rustic entertainment among the ruins."

"I am infinitely obliged to you, my dear Clara, for being convinced of this fact; but, unfortunately, it will be impossible for Mildred and myself to return home with you, as I have an engagement at three o'clock," replied Lord Elvaston.

"Oh! I am so grieved. But, Mildred," continued she, dragging Miss Effingham a few paces from the group, "why did you not bring Lord Alresford?"

"When I left home, he proposed to be busily engaged during the whole morning with letter-writing," replied Mildred, rather embarrassed.

"How provoking! You must excuse me, Mildred, but I protest I should be ready to quarrel *à la mort* with any man who preferred occupying himself with his correspondence, rather than obey my sovereign will and pleasure. Mamma, however, declares these philosophical lovers generally make attentive husbands; and I am sure I cannot help thinking there is truth in what she says, for never was there a more devoted lover than Mr. Macpherson, and now poor dear Jemi only catches a glimpse of him once or so in a couple of days."

And here, in the pursuit of her silly scheme, she had subjected Lord Alresford to the impertinent comments of such a girl as Clara Tennyson! Mildred felt her cheek tingle.

"I assure you it was my fault, and my own fault alone, Lord Alresford did not accompany me here this morning," replied she, coldly.

"Oh, I am sure of it: I do not doubt it!" rejoined Miss Tennyson, quickly; for there was that now in Miss Effingham's tone—a species of distant coldness and slight hauteur—which

invariably reminded her young friends, save the privileged Helen Campbell, when Lord Elvaston's heiress conceived they were trenching on the sacred ground of conventional *bienséance* in the freedom of their remarks. "But, my dear Mildred, if you have no objection, let us walk up the hill, and take a stroll round that beautiful meadow. We shall be back by the time mamma is comfortably packed in the carriage; then we will have a biscuit and a glass of wine—which necessities, I assure you, Mr. Frank Norwood took famous good care to remind me of—and afterwards ride back to Settringham. I trust to you to persuade Lord Elvaston."

"What is that you say about me, Miss Tennyson?" said Mr. Norwood, suddenly turning, and bending his good-natured eyes on her face.

"Only that Mr. Frank Norwood is monstrously proficient in the art of taking care of himself," rejoined Clara, with a laugh.

"And a deuced good quality too! There is nothing like a short campaign on the turf for making men's wits keen as a razor, is there, Frank?" said Sir Richard, with a knowing wink.

"Hallo! Stop, Dick! Never drag up old scores. He must be a wretched driveller, indeed, who does not pluck up his mettle, and see a little farther than most men, after a plunge into Newmarket—ahem, what shall I call it?"

"Knavery! you mean, Mr. Norwood. Make a clean breast of it at once!" exclaimed Miss Tennyson, in a loud voice.

"My dear Clara, you do shock me so terribly with your dreadful strong expressions," cried Lady Tennyson, affectedly raising her handkerchief to her nose.

"Bravo, Clara!" exclaimed Lord Elvaston.

"Why, there is a good deal of that, and I won't attempt to deny it, though more's the pity," resumed Mr. Norwood, nowise abashed; "but I was going to observe, Miss Tennyson, a man may throw all care for himself behind his back when he enters Settringham. By Jove! he lacks not a single element to make life delightful!" continued he, energetically.

Miss Tennyson tossed her head, with a little abrupt laugh; but her eye still rested complacently on the good-humoured visage of Mr. Frank Norwood,—for, be it known to the reader, she was not blind to the advantage, in a worldly point of view, of attracting the admiration of a man, who, unlike her brother-in-law Macpherson, really possessed the *de quoi* for indulging in the luxury of horses and grooms, at discretion; and who made the neighbouring county ring with the rollicking conviviality of Chartleigh House.

"Mr. Frank Norwood is evidently preparing a fresh burst of pathos: 'tis a pity his eloquence should meet any other

ear than Miss Tennyson's," said Colonel Sutherland, in a supercilious whisper to Mildred: "let us stroll about. I trust Miss Effingham will do me the honour of accepting my arm—perhaps for the last time."

Mildred silently placed her hand on the colonel's arm.

"Come, what is the use of our dawdling here?" exclaimed Miss Tennyson. "We are going to walk to the spinney yonder; so, gentlemen, I shall call out, like King Stephen, before the battle of Crecy, 'Let him who loves me, follow!' Oh, I see, colonel, you have already secured a companion. Sir Gerard, I choose you for my cavalier: so let us set off without delay, I entreat. Dick, mind and superintend the spreading, or rather unpacking, of our refreshment, by the time we return."

"Willingly; if I have leisure before Black Bess's arrival," replied Sir Richard, doggedly.

"What a barbarian you are to be sure, Dick! Well, mamma, you will desire Hurst to look after it,—or, perhaps, Lord Elvaston will be so very kind as to do so," replied Miss Tennyson, walking away with Sir Gerard.

"I say, Miss Tennyson, what am I to do whilst you are gone?" asked Mr. Frank Norwood, looking rather blank.

"Oh, while Dick is occupied with Black Bess, you stay, by all means, and jockey Spankaway—or perhaps, you may be useful as a cavalier for Carry:—no, you will not be wanted; she is walking yonder, with Captain Vansittart."

"Remember, Mildred, in three-quarters of an hour we must be on our road homewards," exclaimed Lord Elvaston, seriously uneasy at seeing his darling Mildred walk away, arm-in-arm, with the redoubtable colonel.

"Your lordship may depend upon our punctuality: so go on—go on, good people!" cried Miss Tennyson, starting off at a brisk pace.

"What a thousand pities it is that Miss Tennyson, with all her many good qualities, should have contracted so unfeminine a deportment," said Colonel Sutherland, as they slowly ascended the hill. "When you leave the county, Miss Effingham, the world, for a season, will drown its regret by turning its attention to the affairs of Settringham; for I foresee a marriage will soon connect the Tennysons with the owner of Chartleigh."

"Indeed! I fancied the acquaintance with Mr. Norwood was a very recent affair."

"Very recent. Three months ago, when Sir Richard and Mr. Frank Norwood met at our mess they were strangers; but you know, Miss Effingham, a web is easily woven to entangle the heart: would that, when once captured, its fetters were stronger—more indissoluble!"

"When such is not the case, generally speaking, some radical and fatal error intervenes, rest assured. Some *penchant* which ought not to have been indulged——"

"Affection is not always to be moulded at will, Miss Effingham. A bright vision of beauty and goodness floats upon us, and 'tis vain to resist. Against every sentiment of prudence, every suggestion of reason, the heart yields to the fascination, and then there follows bitter remorse; for in errors of the heart there is no room for repentance; even the gentlest natures become stern and implacable. Do you know of any possible extenuating circumstances, Miss Effingham?"

Mildred pondered. Her cheek was flushed, but her tone and manner were firm and collected.

"It depends whether we have voluntarily placed ourselves in the position from which this bright vision, to use your own words, moves us to recoil; whether we have freely sought our fate, or whether it has been imposed upon us; whether, in short, in the pursuit of our own selfish passions we have recklessly trifled with the peace, or taken advantage of the peculiar situation of another—knowing at the same time that our own position, and every tie of honour, were our circumstances fully exposed, would forbid such a project, even had no obstacle existed on theirs," replied Mildred firmly, raising her eyes to his face.

"But do you make no allowance for the severity of the temptation?" said Colonel Sutherland colouring.

"Remember the old Spanish adage says, with as much truth as wisdom, '*Gustos y disgustos son no mas que imaginacion!*'" rejoined Mildred, with a smile.

"But you did not find it so in your experience, Miss Effingham," replied he reproachfully. "Lord Alresford——"

"Stay!" interrupted Mildred, impetuously, colouring deeply—for she longed to atone, however imperfectly, for the slighting manner and language into which she had been betrayed at the unfortunate dinner party—"on the contrary, my case strongly illustrates the proverb. It was imagination alone which led me into the error of speaking hastily and unguardedly of a man who now, short as the time appears, possesses my esteem and highest admiration."

"I was sure it must be so in time; yet, oh, Miss Effingham, you have only declared your esteem and admiration are Lord Alresford's; but your love——"

Mildred trembled: her breath came quick and fast.

"Is still, thank God, in my own gift, and at the command of my reason!" answered she, after a brief pause, in unfaltering tones. "But have you, indeed, Colonel Sutherland, the right to ask me this question? Can it be true that, knowing my early betrothal to Lord Alresford, you have insidiously

tried to win his place in my regard : when, as I have been told, by your own spontaneous act you pledged your faith, scarcely eighteen months ago, to Miss Conway ? ”

“ That I love you deeply, fervently, to the destruction of my future peace, and that I now pay the penalty of my folly by knowing you the bride of another, let this suffice you, Miss Effingham. Press me no more ; at least leave me the feeble consolation of your esteem,” replied Colonel Sutherland, in a voice of deep agitation.

Mildred, however, the usually gentle and tender-hearted Mildred, resolutely closed her ears to this appeal : a sudden chill seemed to have blighted, and deadened her sympathy.

“ As you value my good opinion, Colonel Sutherland, answer me truly and sincerely. Let not a shadow of doubt linger on our mutual positions. Are you engaged to marry Miss Conway ? ” demanded she, again, in cold, constrained tones.

“ Since you positively demand an answer, Miss Effingham, and ask it, moreover, in the name of what I prize most in the world—your esteem—I will openly confess such an engagement does subsist,” rejoined Colonel Sutherland, in low, hesitating tones. “ Since I have known you, this fatal chain weighs me to the ground. I have been upon the point of avowing everything a thousand times ; but I had not courage to endure banishment from your presence. I implore you, speak, Miss Effingham ; say I have not quite forfeited everything, save your contempt ! ” continued he, earnestly.

A burning, choking sensation arose in Mildred's throat ; the blood rushed to her face, her neck, her hands, and then receded again, leaving all pale as alabaster, even to her lips. She felt crushed under the humiliation. It was, then, true that she had been made the sport, the *passetemps* of a heartless, selfish deceiver. For this man, such as he was, she had inflicted trouble and anxiety, pang after pang, on all she loved—on her gentle mother, her indulgent father—on Helen, and had well nigh, if not totally, alienated her betrothed husband. Never had she been so sensible of the exceeding bitterness of deviating, however slightly, from the strict path of rectitude. She felt self-convicted ; and now mourned, as deeply even as Helen could desire, that absence of candour and confidence towards him, whose powerful mind could have safely steered her amid the perils of her own unsettled, wandering fancy.

“ Miss Effingham, is my offence beyond forgiveness ? Will you not bestow a word, not even a glance, on one who has so long lived on your smile ? ” said Colonel Sutherland, taking her hand.

She hastily snatched it from him.

“ Is it possible any human being could act so basely ? Oh, Colonel Sutherland, the confession I have this day heard from

your lips is indeed my sorest punishment for having swerved, even in the mere fact of admitting your attentions, from the faith it was my duty to preserve towards him to whom my parents had given me. Why have you made me the degraded object of receiving attentions stolen from another? Why was I unwittingly made the destroyer of Miss Conway's peace? How dare you have acted thus towards me?" exclaimed she, passionately.

"You are harsh, Miss Effingham. May I not, on the other hand, inquire of you, had I been free, whether you could finally have realised the hopes *your* conduct led *me* to cherish? Were your manners and deportment, when first we met, such as to induce me to credit the prevailing report of your engagement? Dazzled by the brightness of your beauty, I was led on step by step—deluded by the thought, that if the rumour were true, my attention could not endanger your happiness, over-confident, likewise, in the strength of my own attachment to Lord Normanton's sister—until at length the chain became too strong, and I ceased to wrestle. You never alluded to your engagement, and I lulled myself in the vain hope that after all it might not be so."

"Then the affianced husband of Miss Conway, **you** thought it no crime to ensnare and destroy the peace of another for your own selfish gratification. I thank you, Colonel Sutherland, for what you had in reserve for me," exclaimed Mildred, turning indignantly round.

"No, by Heaven! you wrong me, Miss Effingham. To obtain your favour, I would only too joyfully resign everything—everybody!" replied Colonel Sutherland, in a low agitated whisper.

Could Colonel Sutherland have seen the contempt that at this moment flashed from eyes which in days of yore he had been wont to declare soft and tender as houris', it would have haunted him for many a long day afterwards.

"Poor Miss Conway!" exclaimed she, almost sarcastically.

"Nay: Miss Conway's case is less worthy of commiseration than mine, since you deign to pity her. But will you deprive me of every consolation? Say, I implore you, Mildred, had it been with me as it ought before I presumed to raise my eyes to you, would you now have bidden me hope?"

How did Mildred's heart thrill at these words! Though indignation now seemed to master every other feeling, the clear earnest tones of that voice had once fallen pleasantly on her ear. She had dreamed, too, of the love which now stood revealed, as the utmost felicity which could befall her; yet, in the brief space of half an hour, how changed her feelings! The dazzling vision of imagination had fled; but its shadow still lingered, and fostered amid its deepening gloom, a sickly

sense of lonely desolation. How could she reply to his question? She felt it her bounden duty towards Miss Conway, no less than what the claims of Lord Alresford imperatively demanded, not to suffer the presumptuous colonel to be conscious of the powerful sway he once wielded over her. She therefore promptly replied,—

"No, Colonel Sutherland, I could not bid you hope. Ere I pronounced words of such import your character must have been better known to me. Perfect confidence and esteem, as I said before, must ever be the foundation of true affection; and, believe me, whenever this is wanted, even in the minutest degree, all will end in disappointment and mutual distrust. I could worship integrity, pure, loyal and unshaken!"

Colonel Sutherland bit his lip.

"The end of my short delirium of love is, then, that you thoroughly despise me. 'Tis hard to bear, Miss Effingham!" said he at length, with an effort.

"Despise you! Oh! do not think so," replied Mildred, quickly and earnestly, for she knew the galling torment of supposing such a feeling in the breast of one whose regard we value. She paused for a few moments. The colonel continued walking silently by her side. "Would you really wish to regain my good opinion—my gratitude, Colonel Sutherland?" at length asked she, very gently.

"Nay; do not ask me this, Miss Effingham. I would obey you even at the risk of my life. I would forfeit everything to stand as I did in your favour one little month ago," replied he, with emotion.

"Then relieve my conscience of the anxiety I must unknowingly have inflicted on Miss Conway, by going directly—nay, this very evening—to Moreton. I beseech you, Colonel Sutherland, refuse me not the consolation of thinking I have repaired, as far as possible, the injury committed. Plead urgently, and if she indeed loves you, she will forgive. Will you grant my prayer?" said Mildred, tears rising in her eyes.

"If she loves me she will forgive, say you! Ah! I once dreamed of urging this plea to another," replied Colonel Sutherland, hastily.

Mildred turned away.

"Miss Effingham, cost me what it will, I will try to obey you."

A sad smile curled Mildred's lip. She had erred, and was beginning to feel that repentance was harder—bitterer—than the resolute avoidance, in the first instance, of temptation. Oh! that more would heed this, and be warned betimes!

"Then we are reconciled. Colonel Sutherland, I pray you, let us never, never revert to what has now passed between us. As for the share I have had in fostering your error—for I

feel while censuring you I am far from guiltless myself—I earnestly entreat your pardon. May I think you bear me no resentment for what has been so culpable in my deportment?” said she, in subdued tones, raising her soft eyes to his.

“Resentment! Do you ask whether I regret you smiled upon me? and that for a brief space I fancied myself beloved? No, Miss Effingham, in the hard sentence you have pronounced I acknowledge your rectitude; and that Mildred Effingham, to have acted consistently with herself, could not have decided otherwise. My folly has brought its just reward, in an attachment which will but expire with myself.”

Mildred could not reply;—she felt a *serrement de cœur* which bereft her of the power of speech, and silently they wended their way to the foot of the hill, where already some of the party had arrived.

“Bless me, Mildred, how dreadfully white and fatigued you look! I trust you have not realised Lord Elvaston’s forebodings, and actually got wet in the feet!” exclaimed Clara Tennyson, darting forwards as Miss Effingham approached, “you should have walked more in the centre of the meadow instead of groping along under the shade of the plantations, where we observed, Colonel Sutherland, you in a most unsoldier-like fashion led Miss Effingham. You will never do for a guide, I can tell you, if you are thus careless of the health and convenience of your companion. But come along, my dear Mildred, and drink a glass of sherry, which I hope will kindle again your roses. You look so pale and fagged, Mildred! I am grieved you were unfortunately compelled to go draggling alone with that stupid colonel,” said Clara, as she seized her friend’s arm, and walked away towards the carriage in which Lady Tennyson sat enthroned.—“After all, he is but what my precious brother would call a slow-coach. Do hark at those shouting men! One would imagine them a pack of lunatics bawling in Bedlam!” continued Clara, as the kicking and plunging of horses echoed round, and the air rang with confused shouts.

To please Lady Tennyson the carriage had been removed, so as to furnish her with a full view of the sport of her son and his delectable friend, and all the gentlemen were gathered around it. Lord Elvaston, however, the moment his eye fell on Mildred’s wan countenance, quietly ordered the horses round, whilst she took the refreshment thrust into her hands by the determined Clara.

“Come, Milly, I am sorry to hurry you away, but you remember I have an appointment this afternoon at Harlington. Baynton, pray do not imagine yourself bound to accompany us home. You will, I dare say, find your way back there some

time before half-past seven," said Lord Elvaston, approaching very resolutely to pay his farewell compliments to Lady Tennyson.

"Thank you, I am quite ready now," quickly replied Sir Gerard. "Miss Tennyson, I am sorry I cannot stay to see the finale of Spankaway and Black Bess's feats, but I promised to ride with Lord Elvaston to Harlington. You must know now I intend to settle permanently at the Chantry; I am making turnips and short-horns my serious study: it would, therefore, be a pity to lose such an opportunity—so farewell, with many thanks for a most delightful walk."

"I suppose we shall soon see you again?" said Miss Tennyson, shaking hands.

"Very soon, I trust."

Colonel Sutherland meanwhile approached, and aided Mildred to mount her horse. His hand lingered on hers as he placed the reins in her grasp.

"May you be happy, Miss Effingham,—happier than I! I will obey your commands, and set out for Moreton," whispered he hurriedly.

Mildred hastily drew down her veil—and they parted.

Thus vanished Mildred Effingham's fairy dream, and stern reality stood before her, armed with all its terrors—for stern was it to her, though, doubtless, her lot was incomparably more enviable without, than with the fascinating colonel; but Mildred was the child of rank, wealth, and luxury, and what she sighed for was *affection*. Her spirit longed for that thing, rare, precious, and beyond price—a faithful devoted heart—on which to stay her own: and can it excite wonder if a chill sensation crept over her mind when imagination pictured the fastidious, *exigeant* individual to whom her faith was pledged, and who she had that very morning so rashly braved? When Mildred arrived at her home she scarcely knew how the time had passed since she quitted the enclosure of the Abbey of Fernly, and waved her parting adieux to the noisy assemblage there. Her cheek was hot and flushed, and there was a sharp, restless glitter in her eye which did not escape Lord Elvaston's notice,—as he lifed her from the horse, and felt the burning heat of the little hand in his grasp.

"Why, Milly, my child, what's the matter? your hand feels quite feverish! I hope you have not caught cold during this foolish expedition. Come with me and I will speak to your mother;" but Mildred shook her head, and bounded away up stairs.

"I dare say Miss Effingham is fatigued with her ride," suggested Sir Gerard.

"Fatigued! nothing of the kind, my dear Baynton. She has ridden with me for hours ere to-day, and never com-

plained of fatigue. That absurd Clara Tennyson, with all her confounded folly and megrims, ought positively to be voted a nuisance in the county! By Jove! she and her mother make a precious pair!" grumbled Lord Elvaston, as he slowly remounted his horse, and, accompanied by Sir Gerard, took the road to Harlington.

CHAPTER X.

RECONCILIATION.

MILDRED proceeded straight to her dressing-room, and hastily closing the door, threw aside her hat and gloves, and sank into a chair—to think. She sat with one hand supporting her throbbing temples; and, though one design alone stood boldly prominent amid the confusion of ideas which thronged her mind, yet the prop on which she had rested for so many days past had been hurled from her with a shock so sudden, that she felt it impossible at first to realise the fact. Vainly she clasped her fingers across her aching brow, to shut out the bewildering sensation of utter loneliness; to stay the sounds of the laughter, the obstreperous merriment which still rang in her ears. The more she strove to give coherence to her ideas, the heavier did the sense of desolation press home. She felt degraded in proportion as her reliance on Colonel Sutherland's truth and honour had been steadfast. She thought then of Lord Alresford, and what his stern contempt for her thoughtless levity must be; and bitterly, intensely did she now deplore the folly which reared this barrier between them! Mildred had, however, formed her purpose; but, though strong in her resolve, her heart trembled at its decision,—long she struggled for firmness, but at length her spirit yielded, and, overpowered with conflicting emotions, her head sank on the pillow, and she wept bitter tears of anguish.

Presently the pendule on the chimney-piece struck. It wanted a quarter to four. She hastily arose, and dashing the tears from her eyes, rang the bell. In a few minutes Aglaë obeyed the summons. She started, and gazed on Mildred for a second with surprise and alarm; but instantly divining some uncommon event had occurred to raise this tumult of agitation, she forebore to utter a syllable, but quietly advancing to the toilette, took up a bottle and sprinkled some drops of eau de Cologne on the pale brow of her young mistress.

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She then hastily unfastened the tight habit and held a glass of water to poor Mildred's trembling lips. In a short time her sobs ceased, and she stood up.

"Thank you, my kind, attentive Aglaë. I feel much better now. I believe I am dreadfully nervous, and over-fatigued with my long ride. Pray make haste, for I have a great deal to do before the dressing-bell rings, and it is now four."

"But surely Mademoiselle will take rest before dinner. Oh, pray do."

"No, no. Make haste!" and Mildred hastily seated herself at her toilette.

Aglaë refrained from further entreaty or comment, and immediately applied herself to smooth her mistress's disordered hair. With restless eagerness Mildred watched the operation; never before had she felt so impatient and excitable, and her fingers trembled as she hastily took one thing, and then another from the table, as the idea occurred that it might be wanted, or that Aglaë's eye was in search of it.

"Where is Miss Campbell?" asked she hastily, when at length she stood arrayed as she had been at the breakfast table that morning.

"Mademoiselle is in de boudoir on de sofa. I tink she appear much better."

"And mamma."

"Milédi is sitting with Miss Campbell—and Milor——"

Mildred turned away, and took up her watch and chain from the toilette. Her colour wavered.

"Pardon, Mademoiselle, permettez que je vous passe cela autour du cou. Milor, as I was saying, cross de hall, and enter de library as I come up into your room, about tree quarter of an hour ago, just before you return. C'est une chose merveilleuse, Mademoiselle, de vary great deal de English gentleman write!"

"Well, Aglaë, that will do now. Pray, tell mamma and dear Helen that I will come to them very soon, but just now I wish not to be disturbed, as I have something very important to do; and, Aglaë, do not mention to mamma, lest it should alarm her, that I did not feel quite well after my ride."

"Very well, Mademoiselle. Certes, c'est ce chien de climat qui donne des attaques de nerfs!" murmured Aglaë, as she closed the door, and went to perform her errand in her best and most engaging manner: for Aglaë was a model of discretion, and, unlike her countrywomen generally, possessed complete mastery over her tongue; and she, moreover, would sooner forfeit her right hand than betray any fact she suspected her beloved young mistress would rather have concealed.

Aglaë's steps had no sooner ceased to echo along the corridor, than Mildred turned, and hastily seizing the half-filled

goblet of water, which still stood on the table, swallowed its contents at a draught, and without once venturing to put the smallest question to her heart, opened the door, and descended with the speed of lightning. With hurried step she sped along the vestibule, laid her hand resolutely on the lock of the library-door, and entered.

It was a lofty room, lighted by three large Gothic windows. Near one of these Lord Alresford was seated writing. A couch was drawn into the deep recess of the window, upon which lay a quantity of books, one open, with its face turned on the leather cushion, as if some one had just risen from its perusal. Lord Alresford immediately laid down his pen, and looked up in surprise as Mildred, with firm, unshaken step, advanced and stood before him. Her cheek was very white, and her lips firmly compressed.

"I have sought your lordship to announce that I am ready and willing to confirm our engagement," said she, in a low immovable voice, bending her eyes to the ground.

Lord Alresford did not speak for some seconds. Mildred felt his gaze was riveted upon her, and the colour rushed to her face and neck.

"Really, Miss Effingham, your conduct forms a most extraordinary and unexpected *dénouement* to the scene of this morning. Excuse me, if I distinctly entreat you to understand, that I will not submit to be trifled with; and as, from your manner, you could scarcely have meditated your present step then, believe me, it will redound to our mutual advantage if you take longer time for consideration," replied he at length, severely.

Mildred's heart palpitated. Had she then sunk so low in his esteem, that even the strength and reality of her good resolution was doubted?

"I have reflected; my decision would be as it is now," rejoined she, proudly.

"If so, you of course consider yourself amenable to any explanations I think proper to demand; and thus empowered, Miss Effingham, I ask you, in the first place, whether your intimacy with Colonel Sutherland has ceased totally and for ever?"

Mildred covered her face with her hands, while every nerve shook with agitation. Presently she raised her head, and her proud lip quivered painfully as she encountered the searching gaze bent upon her.

"I have erred, and deserve this humiliation," murmured she. "Colonel Sutherland is engaged to marry Miss Conway!" exclaimed she, at length, with a violent effort, instantly burying again her face in her hands.

"Miss Effingham! Mildred! Nay, I beseech you, be calm!"

exclaimed Lord Alresford, hastily, shocked at her excessive emotion, and penetrated with admiration at her noble, frank avowal of a fact so very mortifying to her vanity and self-love. "I fain trust it is now superfluous for me to point out the magnitude of your error, or the injury you have been the means of inflicting on Miss Conway; to say nothing, Mildred, of the reproaches I might so justly pour upon you for your faithless disregard of vows solemnly pledged to me! Would that you had sooner yielded to the conviction, that I was not the only person injured by—forgive me, if I so designate it—your heartless coquetry!" added the earl quickly, in the same tones.

"Then you were aware of Colonel Sutherland's engagement?" said Mildred, faintly.

"Yes; I learned it from Lady Normanton herself——"

"And yet you never warned me of the precipice on which I stood," cried she, passionately.

"Pardon me, Miss Effingham, it was not for me, a party so closely interested, to inform you of a fact, which, if you possessed a particle of womanly feeling and generosity, must have sufficed to drive from you, in scorn and abhorrence, a man capable of such deception; nevertheless, I knew you had been told. I knew this very circumstance had been pleaded to you by Lady Elvaston, and yet you refused to believe! Did you regard my expostulations? Did you before heed my entreaties when I urged you, on the faith you owed me, to avoid Colonel Sutherland's society. Conceive my feelings of indignation, when, on my return hither, I found the country ringing with scandal on the subject of your indiscreet familiarity with such a man as Colonel Sutherland! No, Mildred; even your mother could not offer a word of palliation for her daughter."

"It was an infatuation! Lord Alresford, I will take all your reproaches meekly, for I feel I deserve them. Yet could you know how I have suffered, perhaps even these might be spared me!" exclaimed Mildred, tears pouring down her cheeks.

"Mildred, do you indeed sincerely desire our reconciliation?" said the earl, bending upon her a searching look.

"Should I be here, my lord? Think you, I would else listen to your reproaches?" exclaimed she, her eyes flashing through her tears. "But I have small hope of obtaining your forgiveness."

"If you would truly obtain it, Mildred, tell me all your heart. If our engagement is to be ratified anew, there must be no concealments between us; for it would, indeed, be mockery to say to you now, I forgive that, which in my wife I would not tolerate a moment. I must know more of this

affair with Colonel Sutherland. Are you willing to grant me this explanation?" asked the earl, gravely.

Mildred paused. She raised her eyes timidly to Lord Alresford's face; he was standing by her side, and she saw that in its expression which showed her he would admit no longer of trifling. There was an indescribable something which cast its spell over her spirit whenever she conversed with him. Perhaps the charm lay in the simple truthful decision of his tone and manner. She felt the warm blood tingle in her cheek; yet she hastened to reply; for, with all her faults, hers was not one of those disingenuous natures who dare offend, and yet when fully convicted of injustice, shrink from healing the wound occasioned by its rash impetuosity.

"I will give you this explanation, or any other you choose to ask," replied she, in a low, unsteady voice.

"Then answer me, Mildred. How far, on my arrival here, were you compromised with Colonel Sutherland? Were his advances limited only to paying you marked attention? or had he presumed to breathe the word *Love* into the ear of my betrothed wife?—ah, Mildred, that I should add also, perhaps with her assent!"

Mildred's brow crimsoned. Never, perhaps, before had she experienced a moment so exquisitely painful.

"Colonel Sutherland never spoke to me on that—that subject——" and she paused.

"Never?"

"Until this morning; and then he owned the fact of his engagement. But the error has been all on my side. Blame me alone, my lord. I acknowledge myself guilty! Yes," continued she passionately, "I will not seek to palliate it. My conduct when first we met, was not such, I avow to my shame, as to induce him to believe I was no longer free! What more do you require to know?"

"Much—everything, Mildred! Is it to this fact,—this unexpected revelation of Colonel Sutherland's dishonourable trifling that I am indebted for your sudden wish for reconciliation?" asked the earl, coldly.

"Do you deem me so dishonourable? No, Lord Alresford, even when writhing under the severe though merited rebuke contained in your letter after that unfortunate evening, I still, as Miss Campbell will bear me witness, firmly resolved to fulfil my engagement to you!" rejoined Mildred, vehemently.

"You astonish me! Indeed, I should have found it difficult to divine such an intent; and your reception likewise, Mildred, of the man whom you intended to make your husband, was certainly unique of its kind!" replied the earl, in accents slightly ironical.

"Lord Alresford, mine was a misery which then almost bereft me of the powers of reason! I feared you! I knew my conduct had been reprehensible, so long as the engagement subsisted between us, in the highest degree. Try if you can consider me during that evening not responsible for my actions. I saw your contempt; but ah, it did not exceed that I afterwards felt for my own deed!"

"Nay; not contempt, Mildred," replied the earl, in gentler tones. "I lamented that you thought it necessary to persevere in so dubious a path, and lacked sufficient candour to open your heart to me, to whom your confidence is due. Believe me, had you done so, the miserable anxiety of the last few days would have been spared you. Now, tell me, what was the purport of your journey to meet Colonel Sutherland this morning?"

"To ascertain the fact of his engagement. I could not rest until I knew whether I had been deceived—trifled with!" replied Mildred, colouring, and smiling bitterly.

"And how did you reply to the confession of his attachment, Mildred?"

"How? By imploring him to proceed forthwith to Moreton; which he promised on his honour to do to-morrow. I knew no other way of making atonement to Miss Conway. Have I now finished my humiliating confessions, Lord Alresford?" asked she, hiding her face in her hands.

Lord Alresford mused for some time. Mildred sat motionless—silent in the bitterness of her spirit. Presently, he seated himself by her on the couch, and gently removed the cold, trembling fingers which clasped her brow.

"Mildred, let me look in your eyes. I have one more question to ask you," said he, gently. His tones went to her heart, so that she even forgot her awe.

She raised her tearful eyes, and faintly smiled.

An eloquent and illustrious father of the Church has said, "Nothing is sweeter than tearful eyes. For this is the noblest member we have, and the most truthful, and the soul's own, and therefore we are so bowed therewith as though we saw the spirit itself lamenting;" and this same witchery seemed to be felt, too, by Lord Alresford.

"I will forgive you all the past, Mildred, if you will now answer me truly and honourably. Deceit on this point could but entail upon us additional misery and alienation. Have you given your affection to Colonel Sutherland? Forgive me, if my question pains you, but there must not—there shall not be reserve between us on this matter!" added he, quickly, as she hurriedly drew her hand from his grasp.

How unutterably thankful did Mildred now feel that she could truthfully answer in the negative!

"Whatever delusion I might once have cherished has vanished. It was a delusion, and is consequently dissipated for ever!" replied she, earnestly.

"Are you sure you read your own heart aright?"

"Perfectly. Colonel Sutherland can never more be anything to me," added she, bitterly.

"Then let the past be forgotten, Mildred, and I own you again as my betrothed," said Lord Alresford, taking her hand, and slightly touching with his lips her fair forehead. "But, as you value your own peace; as you prize the happiness which the future may some time have in store for us, build not up again a reserve which can but tend to our further alienation. May I not reasonably expect the unreserved confidence of a woman, who, whatever may be her motives, has a second time pledged herself willing and ready to stand towards me in the nearest and dearest possible relation? Answer me, Mildred: will you withhold this confidence?"

"Indeed, from henceforth, I will try to be everything you desire," murmured she. "And yet, Lord Alresford, judge not so harshly of me, I beseech you, as to imagine that either irritation or expediency have induced me to solicit your forgiveness,"—she paused abruptly, for she felt she could assign no cause.

"What your motive is, Mildred, I will not now urge upon you. To your conscience I leave it. One thing more," continued the earl, with some hesitation, while the colour mounted to his brow: "the compact between our parents, on which our engagement is formed, is surely well known to you; but I fain would trust you have done me the justice to feel assured that, be your decision what it may, Lord Elvaston's claim on what he has so long and nobly used, cannot thereby be affected in the smallest degree. Forgive me, if I distress you, Mildred; but you know I am acting in perfect frankness, in accordance with my own counsel and advice to you," added the earl, kindly, as he noticed the rising flush on her cheek.

"I never doubted your generous forbearance, my lord; but it is now my most earnest desire to fulfil that compact in every respect."

Lord Alresford smiled.

"Now, Mildred, tell me what it was that first lured your allegiance from me?" asked he, after a pause of some minutes.

"In the first place, you left me to my own cogitations, in a manner, you must confess, my lord, anything but flattering to my *amour propre*."

"Granted: and you feared me also, Mildred?"

"I do not know whether I am totally free from that feeling even now," replied she, more truthfully than she would have been inclined seriously to admit.

"Had my terrors been sufficient to awe your perversity into submission, Mildred, I should be more inclined to admit the reality of your words," said the earl, laughing. "But if such a feeling really does exist, I certainly advise you to get rid of it as fast as possible, as very inimical to the *entente cordiale* I intend to subsist between us. What is your third charge?"

"You arrived here without giving me the slightest intimation of your visit. Had I not a right to expect this, my lord?"

"Undoubtedly, Mildred. But you forget you had placed a bar to our correspondence, by neglecting to answer any of the letters I wrote to you from Venice."

This was unanswerable. She felt ashamed of the evident fallacy of her argument. She knew, and inwardly confessed, that none of these things had been the actuating source of her alienation. The wound lay deeper: though little did she then divine how profound a fountain of bitterness lurked in her heart. She looked in the clear, calm eyes riveted on her face, and longed to pronounce that name which for months haunted her imagination, fostered her suspicion, and pursued her even into the dangerous paths of dissimulation. She could have wept, but pride restrained her tears, and sealed her lips.

Lord Alresford perceived some *arrière pensée* lingered.

"The only way, Mildred, I see likely to bring about a good understanding between us, is no longer to delay our marriage. When once we feel our mutual happiness rests irrevocably in each other's power, we shall, perhaps, then learn not to trifle with it," resumed he, after a few minutes' meditation, very gravely. "This evening, therefore, it is my intention to speak to your father, and ask the fulfilment of our contract one month hence; and, after what has just now passed between us, Mildred, you surely will not demur."

"It is very, very soon. Lord Alresford, I beseech you, ask me not yet to leave dear mamma," hastily rejoined she, as imagination vividly pictured the cold glories of Amesbury Park.

"Not too soon, as I am sure you will acknowledge. Amesbury must be your home ere five weeks elapse. I see no end, otherwise, to countless misunderstandings," replied Lord Alresford, coldly and decisively. "I feel assured, Mildred, your good sense will not refuse to cement our reconciliation by this trifling concession."

"This is arbitrary!" murmured she, in a choking whisper.

"It is needful. Think me not harsh: but Amesbury must receive its mistress within the next five weeks, if ever that mistress is to be Mildred Effingham!" said the earl, resolutely.

"This threat is uncalled for, Lord Alresford;" replied Miss

Effingham, resentfully, rising from the sofa, and sweeping back her beautiful ringlets from her brow. "Settle the period of our marriage with my father, my lord, and you shall find me all obedience;" and she would have quitted the room, but the earl firmly retained her hand in his.

"Nay, Mildred, 'tis not thus we part! stay, yet, a little quarter of an hour," and he drew her again on the sofa by his side. "I have much to hear and to relate," said he, with one of those smiles Helen pronounced so fascinating.

Mildred assented: for how could she, with any propriety, do otherwise? A quarter of an hour elapsed—then another. Presently the dressing bell rang, and the library door opened, and Lady Elvaston entered. She paused, in amazement, for the silvery tones of her idolised Mildred smote on her ear, and she perceived her seated by the earl in the recess of the tall window. Lord Alresford instantly seized Mildred's hand, and led her towards her mother.

"Dear Lady Elvaston, congratulate me. I have, at length, prevailed upon Miss Effingham to empower me to demand the fulfilment of our contract a month hence. May I not rely on your intercession with Lord Elvaston?"

"Is it possible? Mildred, my darling child!" exclaimed Lady Elvaston, gazing anxiously on her daughter's burning cheek.

"Mamma, are you not very happy? Why do you not congratulate me?" cried Mildred, hastily throwing her arms round her mother's neck to conceal the tears which gushed from her eyes. "Now, mamma, I shall leave Lord Alresford to relate how your indulged, petted Mildred was brought to her senses," continued she, darting towards the door.

As she passed, her eyes fell accidentally on the small writing table at which Lord Alresford was occupied when she entered. Upon the blotting-case was a sheet of paper half written over, and on the table by its side lay a letter, on the envelope of which she recognised the Avington post-mark, and the pale, fairy-like characters penned by the young mistress of War-dour Court.

It was evident her unexpected entrance interrupted the earl's reply to her communication; yet the name of the Lady Catherine had never been mentioned between them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE DORNTON BALL.

A FORTNIGHT elapsed—and at length the day fixed for the much-talked-of Dornton ball arrived. Invitations to the amount of several hundreds had been issued ; for as there was nothing that Mrs. Wedderbourne and the deceased judge delighted in so much as in exhibiting their pomp and wealth to crowded assemblies, the ball-room at Dornton Park was built on a most magnificent scale, and everything money could command was lavished to make their entertainments the most *recherché* and aristocratic of the county. Mrs. Wedderbourne had now been a widow full fifteen months, and though the good lady hovered on the shady side of sixty, the fortitude and self-denial she so long evinced in denying the gratification of her inherent love for ostentatious show, can alone be appreciated by persons who, like herself, find all pleasures dreary and wearisome, save those culled at random on the margin of the factitious and troubled whirlpool of fashion and excitement.

True though it was, that Mrs. Wedderbourne had solaced the dreary period of her seclusion, after “that untoward event of the dear, kind judge’s unlucky death,” to quote her own words, by an occasional horticultural fête, a select dinner party, or a meet of the hunt ; which latter she declared, “made Dornton look like Dornton again,” yet the busy preparation for her ball appeared to rouse the widow’s faculties to increased vigour and *aplomb*. Early on the important day she might have been seen up betimes, superintending the decorations of her rooms, the suspending of coloured lamps in the trees of the avenue and amidst the plants in her magnificent conservatory, the wreathing of pink calico and garlands, scolding her footmen, lecturing her maid, haranguing poor Caroline Vincent on the incalculable advantages she possessed in having her majority celebrated by so sumptuous a fête, and in unpacking those tempting-looking deal cases from the *magazin* of some first-rate *modiste*, containing her own and Caroline’s delicate toilette for the all-engrossing evening festivity. Next she paid a visit to the housekeeper’s room, and after boring that important functionary with a thousand distracting queries, she put on her bonnet and proceeded to the stables, to make inquiries whether due preparation for the entertainment of her guests’ horses was proceeding in that department. She then continued her promenade to the lodges,

and after there inspecting the arrangements for the evening's illumination, concluded by a forcible admonition to the lodge-keepers and their wives to be on the *qui vive*, and not suffer any vehicle of whatsoever description to pass the gates after nine o'clock, without first exhibiting the pink ticket, with which all her expected guests were provided; Mrs. Wedderbourne having a horror, lest the *éclat* of her assembly should be marred by the insolent intrusion of any of those presumptuous personages, who, both in India and the United Kingdom, will take advantage of a crowd to intrude themselves; besides which, as Watson her butler remarked, "the dear judge's superb gold plate and candelabra almost required the protection of a special division of the county police force." The garden and bouquets next came under our enterprising hostess's surveillance, until, at length, the round of her investigations led her again to the portico of the mansion; and hot and weary she entered her morning room, where, to her intense disgust and indignation, she found her niece quietly lounging in the depths of a well-stuffed arm-chair, devouring the pages of a new novel.

Caroline Vincent was the orphan child of the late judge's only sister. When he returned from the East, Dornton from thenceforth became her home; she received a fashionable education, and everybody began to look upon her as the eventual heiress of the judge's ingots. Great, therefore, was the amazement, when, on the reading of his will, it was discovered that all his property, both real and personal, was bequeathed unreservedly to his widow; his niece being left totally dependent on her aunt's good pleasure: her name appearing only in the last clause of the will, which merely stated *his desire*, that in case Caroline Vincent rendered herself acceptable by dutiful and loving attention to her widowed aunt, Dornton and its appendages, on the latter's death, might become hers.

"My dear Caroline, you must be well aware how greatly I appreciate your general excellent and high-principled conduct," said Mrs. Wedderbourne to her niece, some two months after the judge's death, as they sat at work in the disconsolate widow's darkened boudoir; drawing from the recesses of her sandal-wood work-table the important clause, which she had caused to be transcribed on a slip of parchment. "I know," continued she, "had the Dornton estates been bequeathed to you, I should still have found the same love and dutiful consideration. But, my love, I wished to observe, it rests entirely with you, whether I carry into effect this clause, dictated by your very considerate, generous uncle. It, of course, depends upon whom you marry; for my duty to my ever-to-be-lamented and revered husband, peremptorily forbids me mak-

ing any testamentary bequest, likely to hand the place he loved so well into the possession of some upstart, vulgar plebeian. I am sure, my dear Carry, you comprehend my motives, so, if you please, we will expatiate no longer on this very unpleasant topic."

Mrs. Wedderbourne, as may be divined from the above short specimen of her oratory, was a devout worshipper of rank. A lady, or a gentleman, therefore, with an "honourable" prefixed to his or her name, came in for a most distinguished share of the Dornton honours—a baroness, or a countess was welcomed as the most delectable object in creation. Mrs. Wedderbourne had wealth, but she looked to Caroline to surround the wide spreading Dornton manors with the halo of rank. She dearly loved those outward tokens of respect paid to her circumstances, if not to herself; and never did her spirit repose more complacently on its worldly privileges, than when she drove into the neighbouring town of Stanmore with her sleek bays and powdered footman, and witnessed the profound homage which everywhere greeted her.

Yet notwithstanding all her strainings after it, Mrs. Wedderbourne was not a popular person. True popularity is the offspring of a character guileless, unselfish, amiable, and charitably disposed towards the faults and failings of others; untiring and Christian in its use of those faculties, and means at its disposal for the benefit and gratification of others. Amongst the higher classes, those whom Mrs. Wedderbourne delighted in calling "her set," she was ridiculed for her ostentatious love of display, and her eager desire to gain their applause and friendship; amongst the lower, experience soon revealed the hollowness of her professions of good-will: for, though the lady of Dornton, to insure that popularity she panted for, caused the gates of her park to be thrown open to the public every Monday, yet the multitudes of obstacles thrown in the path of every visitor soon made all but strangers give up the delusive pleasure, and left her woods and gardens in that aristocratic seclusion which she fancied lent a new dignity to her possessions. She wished her neighbours, she said, to profit by her beautiful flowers, and, accordingly, she condescended to patronise the floral shows in the little town of Stanmore; but her gardeners were strictly forbidden to divulge the names, mode of culture, or other peculiarities of the splendid contributions from the Dornton conservatories. The same with her guests: though she professed to invite *everybody* to her large *réunions*, yet it was well known that one of Mrs. Wedderbourne's friendly invitations was, at the very least, the certain warrant of two descents of gentility, which she had as thoroughly investigated as ever did the Chapter of Noble Ladies of Maubeuge the twenty hereditary proofs of

nobility, paternal and maternal, requisite to entitle an aspirant to the dignity of canonesse of their illustrious order.

But to return from our digression on Mrs. Wedderbourne and her peculiarities: the Campbells, amongst hosts of others, received an invitation to her ball. As friends of the Elvastons, it would have been much against the usual tenor of her politics to have passed them by; but independently of this weighty consideration, she really cherished a kind of *faiblesse* for Archibald Campbell. Of Helen, she had been overheard to say when irritated, and declaiming against the listless apathy and affected fine ladyisms of her niece, that "that pretty, modest Helen Campbell was sure to do well, either with sixpence or sixty thousand pounds in her pocket." Altogether, therefore, the family stood well in her estimation. Mr. Campbell properly, however, declined her invitation; but it was arranged that Mrs. Campbell and her two sons should go, while Lady Elvaston insisted on taking Helen.

And Mildred—how had it fared with her during the past fortnight? Even as it will and must do with all when recovering from the intoxicating delusion of passion, based neither on religion, reason or esteem. She suffered acutely; for a change had come over the spirit of her dream, and now imagination—that fruitful multiplier of painted shadows and brilliant ideals—lay subdued and dormant, she was beginning to appreciate at its proper value that position she had so long scorned, and rashly trifled with. Gradually an ardent longing sprang up in her bosom to assimilate herself more and more with a character, the varied excellences of which she was daily becoming more sensible of; and she needed no longer Helen's lips to contrast the upright, manly demeanour of her betrothed, with Colonel Sutherland's selfish conduct. Mildred had courageously made all the amends in her power to atone for her error:—so far as this went, she now reaped the reward of her rectitude, in the absence of that feeling of guilty deceit with which we know how sorely she was oppressed; but although she thus felt her integrity and self-respect restored, the immediate reward was not happiness. A fear, a melancholy presentiment tortured her, that in the pursuit of a vision she had for ever forfeited peace. She knew she was forgiven; but was her offence forgotten, and its impression erased? And this she had no means of ascertaining. Lord Alresford, since the evening of their conversation, never alluded to the subject—never expressed his opinion on any one point of her past conduct—never made even the slightest attempt to elucidate her true sentiments respecting himself. What did this *insouciance* portend?—total alienation, or a keen anxiety lest closer investigation might reveal a character still more irclaimable and shallow?

The very evening of their reconciliation, the earl applied for her father's consent that their marriage might be solemnised after the interval of a month; Lord Elvaston, after vainly pleading for further delay, unhesitatingly gave his assent, and so the matter had been finally arranged. But though now Lord Alresford was her constant companion, and they read, walked, and rode together; though he was most kind and attentive, and appeared gladly, as she thought, to welcome her presence, her awe of him was undiminished: the little magical word *love* had never once escaped his lips; and, with the exception of that one cold caress on her forehead the afternoon of their reconciliation, her intimacy with Sir Gerard Baynton was now established on as familiar a footing. Often as she walked by the earl's side, she longed to burst the restraint between them; to ask what *now* was the barrier to that near and familiar intercourse of spirit which she felt ought to unite them; but poor Mildred dreaded the probing of her own heart; and, more than all, she sickened at the bare supposition that the Lady Catherine Neville's was the hand which turned the fruits of her repentance into bitter ashes upon her lips.

All these varied hopes and fears Mildred imprisoned in her own heart; for not even to Helen could she reveal the suspicion which tortured her. Would not Helen, after all that had passed, look with contempt on a change so sudden, a spirit so vacillating? People little suspect how much advantage, opportunity, and consolation are lost by foolish solicitude as to how we appear, or are likely to stand in the opinion of others; and by a vain deference and morbid sensibility to public censure, on matters which undeniably ought to be left to the conscience and sole option of those whom they alone regard.

Helen, however, was by no means an unsuspecting spectator of the change gradually operating in her friend's sentiments; but both she and Lady Elvaston agreed on the wiser course of not abruptly forcing an avowal, either by comment or remark, which might tempt Mildred's pride to recoil from the consummation they both so profoundly desired.

In this state, so unsatisfactory to Mildred, affairs progressed until the day of Mrs. Wedderbourne's ball. The following morning, Lord Alresford was to depart to Amesbury for a week, to make arrangements for the reception of his bride, and on his return the marriage was to be immediately celebrated. This last day had been spent as usual; but no further approach to a more intimate understanding was achieved, so that Mildred, dispirited and unhappy, entered her dressing-room to prepare for the ball with feelings little in accord with the gay preparations at Dornton. This was the first and last time she was to appear in public with Lord Alresford as his *fiancée*, and

a sort of nervous tremor crept over her. The excitement, however, threw such a lustre over her beautiful face, and her cheek glowed with so delicate and soft a colour, that Helen, as she entered the room a few minutes before they descended to the drawing-room, paused in admiration. Aglaë was adding the last touches to Mildred's simple, elegant toilette.

"Voyez, Mademoiselle!" said Aglaë, quickly, placing a bracelet in Helen's hands.

It was a beautiful bracelet given by Lord Alresford to Mildred on his former visit to the Priory.

"Dear Mildred, will you not wear this? It would be a kind and graceful compliment to the earl," said Helen, persuasively, taking the sparkling gems, and clasping them round Mildred's wrist.

"No, no, Helen! I cannot appear so great a hypocrite. Lord Alresford believes me heartless and unfaithful. I will not wear this gift—one of his few gifts—until he again clasps it on my arm!" exclaimed she, hurriedly quitting the room.

In the drawing-room, they found Lord and Lady Elvaston and their guests awaiting them. Lord Alresford stood by Lady Elvaston on the hearthrug, and Helen thought his eye expressed satisfaction as it lingered a moment on Mildred's elegant figure.

"Come, young ladies, make haste and take your coffee," exclaimed Lord Elvaston, as he glanced proudly from his beautiful daughter to Helen, who certainly looked as pretty and graceful in her snowy muslin dress as can be imagined. "Madame Wedderbourne will think her ball fairly in eclipse until her two belles arrive! Upon my word, Helen, you look dazzling!"

"Ah, Miss Campbell, who shall say you do not owe to me some addition to your very becoming toilette?" said Sir Gerard, presenting Helen with a bouquet of lovely flowers.

Helen slightly blushed.

"It is indeed a beautiful bouquet. How very much I feel obliged to you, Sir Gerard," said she, hastily.

"Come, my dear; come, Mildred: the horses have been standing at the door this half-hour. Sir Gerard, I leave Miss Campbell to your care," cried Lord Elvaston, hurrying his wife from the room.

At the hall door were two carriages. Lady Elvaston, her daughter, and Lord Alresford occupied the first; Lord Elvaston, Helen, and Sir Gerard followed in the other. The night was clear; and though dim twilight hung over the distant landscape, and shrouded the trees and hedgerows in shadowy purple mist, objects along the roadside were distinctly visible. Lady Elvaston spoke little; neither did Lord Alresford appear inclined for conversation; and as for Mildred, her mind was

busy contrasting her present feelings with those under which she had first contemplated Mrs. Wedderbourne's entertainment, and the certainty of sharing its pleasures with the man, who then, of all others, captivated her fancy. An unaccountable sadness weighed down her spirits, and could she only have consulted her own inclination, gladly would she have ordered the horses' heads to be turned, and the road to the Priory retraced. It was while absorbed in reflections as little consolatory and comfortable, that Mrs. Wedderbourne's dazzling illuminations burst on her vision, and the carriage rolled along up the avenue, which was blazing with pink, blue, and orange lights.

As the party approached the house, the loud clash of a military band burst upon their ears; and Lady Elvaston, who appeared highly amused at the elaborate preparations of their hostess, putting her head out of the window, perceived that the sounds proceeded from a kind of open pavilion in the centre of the lawn, exactly opposite the portal of the mansion, surmounted by a flag, emblazoned with the late judge's arms, waving between two large coloured lights.

"The band of the — Dragoons. Of course the officers are amongst Mrs. Wedderbourne's guests," said Lady Elvaston, anxiously, turning and half glancing in her daughter's face.

Mildred quietly smiled: a month ago she would have deemed this *sang froid* as improbable, as that she could ever have a feeling in common with her betrothed. As to the rest, she felt no disquietude at meeting Colonel Sutherland; for, a few days previously, she had delicately hinted the probability of this rencontre to the earl, who promptly replied—

"Of course, Mildred, you will carefully avoid any singularity calculated to attract public attention, and consequently impertinent comment. If Colonel Sutherland asks you to dance, I should advise you to comply."

"For Heaven's sake, let us be going, else this confounded din will drive me wild!" exclaimed Lord Elvaston, impatiently, as they lingered for a moment at the open windows of the apartment assigned by Mrs. Wedderbourne for the cloak room of her guests.

"Mildred, you will accept my arm," said Lord Alresford, in a low voice, crossing to the spot where she stood.

Silently she complied. Her colour wavered a little.

"Well, Miss Campbell, fortune for once favours me. I shall take possession of you as my lawful prize," said Sir Gerard, stepping forwards and drawing the hand of the blushing Helen under his arm.

"Eh! What's that you are saying, Baynton? I must put my veto on any premature *enlèvement* of my favourite Helen!" cried Lord Elvaston, laughing.

"Ah, my lord, I fear my interest in Miss Campbell's favour will only extend to her honouring me with her hand for the very limited period of a quadrille and a couple of polkas!" rejoined Sir Gerard, hastily.

When the ball-room doors were flung open, Mrs. Wedderbourne would have been content with the effect produced on her guests by the very brilliant *coup d'œil* her suite presented. Most of the company had assembled, and lights and jewels glittered in the long vista of rooms; bright eyes sparkled, and exquisite toilettes, some of gossamer texture, floated in the giddy whirl of the waltz: others, of satin or velvet, fell in rich deep folds around the figure of some magnificent dowager, as she slowly paraded up and down. Garlands and festoons of the rarest and most lovely flowers, mixed with draperies of pale pink and silver, adorned the walls and doorways. Beyond the conservatory, which was brilliantly illuminated, Mrs. Wedderbourne had caused a small garden, which she honoured with the epithet of "her own," to be roofed in; and here our indefatigable hostess exhausted the utmost limit of her own and her niece's imaginative genius. Rude imitations of the majestic scenery of Switzerland, burst with what was intended to be startling effect on the eye—huge blocks of granite, piled one above another, intermixed with ponderous masses of slag, around the rough gnarled edges of which the good lady of Dornton had vainly coaxed, for weeks past, the verdant tendrils of some delicate mountain creeper. At stated intervals a mimic cascade gushed over the rocks, and fell with a sudden dash (which, ridiculous as it may appear, certainly startled the fair loungers on the *canapés* in the adjoining conservatory), into a deep precipice, that looked very gloomy and horrible, as Mrs. Wedderbourne thought, when the rush of water ceased, and many a laughing eye peered down into its dismal depths. There were, besides, grottos, sylvan bowers, green arches, murmuring fountains, lights so subdued as to shed around a twilight soft and mysterious; and the air, moreover, was laden with the perfume of multitudes of choice exotics. All was so luxurious, so fresh, and inviting, that a murmur of delight—just tribute to the inventive faculties of the wealthy hostess and her niece—spontaneously burst from the lips of each fair damsel, as, heated with the dance, she strolled, leaning on the arm of her partner, and sank on the tempting divans on the margin of the fountain.

Mrs. Wedderbourne received her guests in a small ante-chamber, opening into the principal ball-room, and there she stood, when Lady Elvaston and her party entered, in front of a gold Louis Quatorze chair, looking as dignified and imposing as black velvet, point, and diamonds, could render her. Near her stood another chair, on which lay Miss Vincent's handker-

chief and fan, as she had particularly insisted that her niece should remain by her side, and assist in receiving the guests ; but the fair Caroline, unable longer to withstand the united temptation of Jullien's band and Sir Richard Tennyson's entreaties, suffered herself to be carried away to the dance. This small room, however, was thronged with people, many of whom were perfect strangers to Lady Elvaston. A buzz of admiration, however, prevailed when Mildred, leaning on Lord Alresford's arm, closely followed her mother. Never had she looked more radiantly beautiful, and the novelty of her *entrée* cast a glow over her cheek.

"I think I never saw a more distinguished-looking man than Lord Alresford. There is something so good, and noble in the expression of his face. Don't you think Mildred Effingham a very beautiful creature, Mr. Norwood?" said Clara Tennyson, as they paused for a few minutes at the folding-doors, just as Lady Elvaston was exchanging compliments with Mrs. Wedderbourne.

"Why, yes, she shows blood, and fire likewise, in those magnificent eyes of hers," replied Mr. Norwood, critically examining Mildred from head to foot ; "she is a very particular friend of yours, Miss Tennyson, isn't she? or, I was going to observe——"

"Observe nothing to me, I beg, Mr. Norwood, but what is highly flattering to Miss Effingham!" peremptorily interposed Miss Tennyson. "Have you ever been introduced to the earl? I should imagine not, as I fancy your pursuits lie rather apart?"

"Why, I can't say I ever met his lordship at Newmarket, though I have in town occasionally. But I can tell you, Miss Tennyson—whether it is that his lordship piques himself on his favour with the ladies, or on his rank and riches—he thinks no small things of himself. He keeps one at arm's length with a vengeance!"

"Really, I am surprised to hear you say so. I have always found him very agreeable ; though certainly there is a reserve in his manner. You know, of course, he is engaged to Miss Effingham?"

"The deuce he is! Well, you really surprise me! I never should have guessed that, from what I saw at Fernly the other day. I wonder how Sutherland feels this evening. You ladies are really unfathomable! But I'll tell you what, I will contrive to scrape acquaintance with his lordship to-night, to please you, Miss Tennyson, and give him an invitation to the Chartleigh steeplechase next month," said Mr. Norwood, good-naturedly.

"Do. Now, really, he will like it of all things, Mr. Norwood," replied Clara, laughing loudly. "I am sure, also, Mildred will

feel gratified. By-the-bye, I wish I could get to speak to her. Stay! never mind, it will do presently; she is talking, I see, to Mrs. Wedderbourne," said she, restraining the efforts of her boisterous admirer to drag her through the throng.

At this instant there was a momentary lull of voices, and Mrs. Wedderbourne's smoothly-pitched tones were wafted forwards to the spot where they stood. She was addressing Lord Alresford.

"I assure your lordship, I have regretted excessively that serious indisposition has prevented sooner the honour of making your acquaintance since your arrival in our county; especially as my charming young friend, Miss Effingham, had long promised me the pleasure of an early introduction."

"That's what I call soft sawder, Miss Tennyson," whispered Mr. Norwood, with a laugh, seizing his partner's hand. "But come, these strains are enough to make the walls dance--let's have another turn;" and away they whirled.

"Stay a minute, I beseech you. Really, Mr. Norwood, this polka will be the death of me. I want to speak to Miss Campbell, and Sir Gerard Baynton, who are just coming towards us," cried Miss Tennyson, suddenly retreating from the circle of dancers. "How d'ye do, Miss Campbell? Sir Gerard, I hope I see you well, whole, and entire, without ache or pain, since your stroll at Fernly; for never having caught a glimpse of you since, I cannot fix a later date for my inquiries."

"Oh, thank you; really I never felt better in my life. That walk with you, Miss Tennyson, up the Abbey hill, was as reinvigorating as a month at Kissingen!" exclaimed Sir Gerard, laughingly, as he and his partner flitted past.

Lord Alresford, in the meantime, as Mildred and her mother were still conversing with Mrs. Wedderbourne, leisurely surveyed the throng for which she had made such magnificent preparation. Suddenly his eye rested on a lady seated far back on an ottoman, rather screened from view by muslin draperies. She was dressed in pale blue crape, and a profusion of fair ringlets encircled a face remarkable for nothing save extreme freshness of complexion, and large, gentle, dove-like eyes. Her figure was very elegant; her air, and the exquisite finish of her toilette and manner, indicated that graceful ease and self-possession rarely acquired but by habitual intercourse with society, and that of the highest kind. She smiled, as her eyes met those of the earl, who appeared excessively astonished at seeing her.

"Mildred," said he in a whisper, "I will be with you again in a few minutes, for yonder, much to my surprise, I perceive one of my old Venice friends, Mrs. Rayland, and I must go and exchange a few words with her. Of course, I claim my privilege of dancing with you first."

Mildred's eyes followed the earl across the apartment. She saw Mrs. Rayland half rise from her seat, and extend her fair hand, while the pleasure the meeting afforded both parties, was sufficiently indicated by the heartiness of their greeting. Mrs. Rayland's pretty features beamed with satisfaction, as she invited the earl to seat himself on the divan by her side, and her gestures were so elegant, so free from affectation, or *empressment*, that Mildred involuntarily sighed.

"Will you dance, Miss Effingham, or will you permit me to lead you to a seat, where you will be less incommoded by the crowd?" said Archibald Campbell, who for some moments had been standing behind her unperceived. "The earl, I suppose, will soon have finished his colloquy yonder, and will be back to claim your hand; but even for a short time, I fear you may find this crushing unpleasant," continued he, glancing somewhat indignantly across the room.

"Thank you. Lord Alresford has only left me for a second, to greet an old friend, so I will await his return by mamma," replied Mildred, hastily, and a deeper shade of sadness seemed to steal over her spirits.

She glanced into the next room, and saw Helen's graceful figure whirling away in the dance, and the animated happy expression of pleasure which rested on the features of her partner—still Sir Gerard Baynton. The strains of music were enlivening, and on the faces of all around she saw smiles and seeming gaiety and happiness, contrasting painfully with the feelings that obtruded themselves in spite of her utmost efforts. Mildred had, however, too much *savoir vivre* to suffer the uneasiness which preyed on her spirits to be detected by the giddy multitude around. If Lord Alresford's indifference led him from her to play the agreeable to his lady friends, her pride supplied her with a sufficient quantum of nonchalant address to take it as a matter of course, and to act accordingly. Therefore, seldom did the sallies of the beautiful, witty Miss Effingham evince more aplomb; or never did a more brilliant *coterie* of all the handsomest and most eligible partners in a ball-room gather round Lady Elvaston and her daughter, than during the twenty minutes Lord Alresford chose to devote to the lovely Mrs. Rayland. Numberless were the entreaties that she would dispose of her fair hand for the brief space of one of Jullien's most captivating polkas; but on this point Mildred was wisely inflexible, though more than once the temptation burned strongly to retaliate a little of the earl's careless indifference on himself. Presently he arose from the side of Mrs. Rayland, and joined the group round her chair.

"I know what you are thinking about, Mildred," said Lord Alresford, as a few minutes after they slowly proceeded arm in arm towards the ball-room: "you are displeased, and consider

my desertion of you just now unkind, even though it were to greet an old friend. Have I interpreted your serious looks aright?"

Mildred hesitated. Had she been candid, and avowed the exquisite pain these small, though oft repeated acts of cool *insouciance* in reality inflicted, all, even then, might have been well between them. But Mildred was piqued: and perhaps, also, elated by the flattering adulation and homage which she knew a single smile could command; and, forgetful for the moment of her own past misdemeanours, pride forbade her to manifest greater eagerness, or to appear to consider a larger share of assiduity desirable than what the earl chose to offer.

Mildred then turned her eyes resolutely away, and answered in tones slightly constrained—

"Oh, no: I have been laughing so heartily at Mr. Melford's lively nonsense, that——"

"That you did not perceive my absence. I understand you, Mildred," rejoined the earl, quickly, as Miss Effingham paused, and the colour suffused her cheek.

"What an extremely attractive looking person your friend Mrs. Rayland is! Who is she? and how came she here?" asked Mildred, hurriedly, as Mrs. Rayland and her partner, Sir Richard Tennyson, passed them.

"Mrs. Rayland is the wife of one of the attachés of the British Embassy at Naples, and a niece of the late Lord Willingham's. She is on her way to visit her relative, Lady Catherine Neville, and came here with Mrs. Farnleigh, her husband's sister," responded Lord Alresford, coldly.

To Mildred's jaundiced fancy, the mystery of the earl's warm salutation was now sufficiently explained. A cousin of Lady Catherine's! Mildred felt her heart close, and every kind impulse towards the elegant Mrs. Rayland enfold itself in its deepest recesses, as Lord Alresford led her to join the same quadrille in which she danced. An introduction then became inevitable; but she watched, with jealous suspicion, every word which passed the lips of the lady, as she kept up at intervals an animated dialogue with the earl. Mrs. Rayland spoke of Italy; alluded to various excursions, balls, and fêtes where they had met; but for a long time, she did not utter Lady Catherine's name, nor refer to anything in which she was concerned. Mildred was almost provoked to find how very unnecessarily her indignation had been kindled.

"These beautiful parterres remind me of the fête given at the Villa Pezzaro last autumn, only the flowers have not the intense fragrance of those blossomed under the fair sky of Italy. That was nearly the last and most pleasant of our many reunions; we had Catherine, and poor Lord Willingham, yourself, that very agreeable Mr. Randolph,—by-the-bye, have

you seen or heard anything of him since your arrival in England, Lord Alresford?" said Mrs. Rayland, as, after the conclusion of the quadrille, she and her partner, Sir Richard, strolled into the conservatory and lingered for a few minutes near the couch on which Mildred sat.

"No: I met Mr. Randolph at Madame de Pezzaro's fête for the first time, and I have neither seen, nor heard of him since," replied the earl.

"Mr. Randolph, in a very short time, contrived to make himself wonderfully acceptable everywhere, I assure you, my lord. Fancy, Sir Richard," continued she, turning and addressing her partner, "a man, handsome, well-dressed, of perfect *ton*, clever, and, apparently, rich enough to buy up all the petty Italian counts and marquesses at a bidding, yet so delightfully mysterious that no one could ever make out who he was, or whence he came: nor was he ever heard to allude to friend, relation, or connection in England or elsewhere; and you may form some slight idea of the hero of our Palermitan *soirées* last autumn."

"Upon my word, a perfect Monte Christo! I wonder you were not all afraid of dealing with so suspicious a character, Mrs. Rayland. You say his name is Randolph?" said Sir Richard.

"Yes: but he does not belong to the C——shire Randolphs; so much I contrived to extract from him. Pray, my dear lord, tell me your opinion of him, for I observed you several times in deep conversation together," said Mrs. Rayland.

"I thought him intelligent, well read, and agreeable; but I saw too little of Mr. Randolph to form any competent opinion. Indeed, I should hardly recognise him again. Is he still at Palermo?"

"Oh, no: after the Willinghams left, Mr. Randolph found us all far too insipid to remain. I met him once since at one of Princess Grassini's *soirées* during the carnival in Naples. His devoted attention to Catherine before she left Palermo drove poor Madame Pezzaro nearly frantic, and she did nothing but bitterly reproach herself for her imprudence in introducing him. It was even whispered Mr. Randolph would have proposed for her had not Lord Willingham given him distinctly to understand that his views for his daughter lay in another and more elevated quarter," said Mrs. Rayland, pointedly addressing herself to Lord Alresford, and smiling so as to disclose a row of the prettiest and whitest teeth imaginable.

Mildred raised her eyes from the ground and listened. A smile lurked around the earl's well chiselled mouth as he turned towards the pretty manœuvrer.

"Well, Mrs. Rayland, I suppose you cannot but agree with me that, for this once, rumour could not have more faithfully represented Lord Willingham's sentiments," replied he.

"Of course. Lady Catherine must have been highly entertained at Mr. Randolph's presumption. By-the-bye, I shall be happy to take charge of any packet or message your lordship may have for Wardour Court or Amesbury, as I leave the Farnleighs to-morrow," said Mrs. Rayland, as she took her partner's arm, for Sir Richard was beginning to grow impatient at her delay.

"Thank you. I need not trespass on your kindness, for I intend to be at Amesbury myself to-morrow. Do you expect Rayland at Wardour?"

"Yes, and no. He has left me in a delightful state of uncertainty as to his movements," replied Mrs. Rayland, merrily, as she tripped away.

Though Mildred knew the earl's journey to Amesbury had long been arranged, yet she could not repress a sudden thrill as she heard it now thus certainly alluded to. The feeling, likewise, that the misunderstanding between them was augmented instead of decreased, on this the last evening they were to spend in each other's society for some time, cast a melancholy gloom over her heart. A feeling of irritation also subsisted: she felt aggrieved. Mrs. Rayland evidently knew nothing of their engagement, and her innuendoes, and pointed manner, only more surely convinced poor Mildred that her suspicion of the mutual attachment of her betrothed and Lady Catherine was only too well founded. What, then, was the mysterious impediment which kept them asunder? Why had not Lord Alresford taken advantage of her past vacillations, to free himself from a distasteful marriage? Preoccupied and miserable, Mildred sat, replying at random to the remarks of the earl; who, spite of her visible disinclination, persisted in talking to her on every subject on earth, but the one nearest her heart. She thought she had seldom seen him more animated and agreeable, and it was clear he did not consider it worth while either to resent, or allude again to the cutting carelessness of the rejoinder she would now have given much to recall.

Meanwhile Mrs. Wedderbourne's ball proceeded as brilliantly as she could desire.

All her guests seemed pleased and happy, and danced away in polka, valse, and quadrille, with indefatigable perseverance. Her niece Caroline, also monopolised a large share of the attentions of Sir Richard Tennyson; in short, nothing could exceed the extreme satisfaction which swelled Mrs. Wedderbourne's bosom, as she paraded her sumptuous suite of rooms.

"My dearest Helen, pray be careful, and do not venture in the conservatory whilst you are so hot. It strikes like an ice-house!" said Mrs. Campbell, suddenly accosting her daughter,

who, escorted by Sir Gerard Baynton, passed the sofa on which she sat.

"Oh! Mrs. Campbell, this is a hint to me. Think of my incorrigible carelessness in hurrying your daughter into such a danger again! What is this delicate-looking fabric on your arm? Will it not be more serviceable here?" asked Sir Gerard, laughing as he playfully took a lace scarf from Mrs. Campbell, and threw it lightly on Helen's shoulders.

"Helen appears in high spirits to-night. I hope she will not droop when this tremendous fuss at the Priory is over, her friend gone, and all excitement also. Sir Gerard Baynton seems monstrous attentive, to be sure!" said Miss Jenks, who, in consideration of her fiftieth cousinship with an Irish baronet, had been condescendingly presented by Mrs. Wedderbourne with one of her ball-tickets.

"Yes," said Mrs. Campbell, complacently watching the retreating figure of her daughter; "yes, Sir Gerard appears pleased to meet his old playfellow again."

"Sir Gerard would make a nice match for Helen; only I understand he is such a dreadful flirt, there is no reliance to be placed on him. He pays attention to half a dozen girls at a time," observed Miss Jenks, slowly.

"Oh! very likely. Sir Gerard's happy spirits, and thoughtless good humour, may very probably lead him into offering lover-like attention to any girl who pleases his fancy. Young ladies, nowadays, must learn not to take everything *au pied de la lettre*," rejoined Mrs. Campbell, with supreme indifference.

"Miss Helen had better avail herself of the good offices of her friend, Lady Alresford that is to be; for, I am told, despite his seeming good-humour, there is not a prouder, or a more exclusive man anywhere than Sir Gerard Baynton: yet, you know, there may be a slight chance of her pretty face and manner having made an impression on the baronet's heart," persisted Miss Jenks.

"My dear Miss Jenks, we ought to feel much indebted to you for weaving such fairy visions; which, I assure you, if realised, would give Mr. Campbell and myself more pain than pleasure; for, although Sir Gerard would make a tolerable match for Helen, were he to do the improbable thing of falling in love with her, we are in no hurry to part with our darling child."

Miss Jenks opened her dull, gray eyes to their utmost extent, and fixed them with a most incredulous expression on Mrs. Campbell's face.

"You are right, my dear friend; these violent smites are sure to go off. I never knew a match to result from one: though, perhaps, I should except that of my own relation, Miss Arabella Jenks, eldest daughter of my friend and cousin,

Sir Hercules Jenks, of Jenks Court, who met Sir Denis O'Lawlor at a ball, and married him the following week : but the case of a girl of Arabella's pretensions, of course, does not at all influence my opinion, and I only trust my favourite Helen will discreetly shut her ear to the baronet's flattery."

"You need not alarm yourself on Helen's account, Miss Jenks. Who is that gentleman dancing with Miss Tennyson?" asked Mrs. Campbell.

"The new squire of Chartleigh, boisterous Frank Norwood, whose harsh voice makes one's nerves shivel! I should imagine poor, drowsy Lady Tennyson finds him a sad nuisance in her drawing-room after dinner : but you see he is rich, and Sir Richard has no objection to a partnership in horses and dogs ; and, it seems, he goes down with the daughter also. Look, Lord Alresford has again betaken himself to the side of the young lady in blue crape. How wretchedly ill Miss Effingham looks to-night!" exclaimed Miss Jenks, as she watched Mildred, who was now dancing in a quadrille with Sir Gerard opposite to where they sat.

"Yes, she seems languid and pale ; but this is not much to be wondered at, considering the fatigues young ladies undergo nowadays," said Mrs. Campbell good-naturedly. "Yet, look as she will, Mildred Effingham always appears a being of a different order to the girls around her : there is something so elegant and refined in her manner."

"That may be ; but at any rate, the earl does not seem inclined quite to acquiesce, for yonder he lounges, with a smile of contentment on his very handsome face, by the side of the fair young lady in blue : and if ever he marries Miss Effingham, I shall say that on both sides it will be hands, not hearts, that are given!" said Miss Jenks, curling her little malicious lip.

"The lady whom Lord Alresford is conversing with is a Mrs. Rayland ; and as to what you say about Mildred, I always hope for the best, Miss Jenks. You know there are some persons particularly undemonstrative in their manner ; but, after all, more really true-hearted than their bustling neighbours."

"Undeniably so, my dear Mrs. Campbell, and I can only echo your insinuation, and trust it may be found all is well between Miss Effingham and her affianced. No one can wish her greater luck and happiness than myself."

"How do you do, Mrs. Campbell? What a bower of garlands Mrs. Wedderbourne has spread for her friends! I never saw anything more beautiful than the *coup d'œil* on entering. I trust Miss Campbell is well, and my friend Archibald? I suppose I shall discover them both presently amid the throng," said Colonel Sutherland, advancing and shaking hands with Mrs. Campbell.

"Yes, they are well, and both here. I conclude you are only just arrived, as we have not met each other before?" replied Mrs. Campbell, inquiringly.

"Only about a quarter of an hour ago, and I have since been paying my devoirs to our hospitable hostess," answered the colonel.

"Poor man! I dare say now he feels right glad that ceremony is over; for, though an admirable woman in every respect, Mrs. Wedderbourne's stupid, prosing pomposity is intolerable!" remarked Miss Jenks, as Colonel Sutherland retired. "But, my dear Mrs. Campbell, did you ever see anybody so altered in appearance as the colonel? I doubt not he finds Miss Conway rather more unmanageable than Miss Effingham does Lord Alresford; and, upon my word, I must own that for engaged people, their flirtation was positively scandalous. I am glad Helen did not join that mad-cap party from Settringham to the Fernly ruins a fortnight ago, for I hear from Betty Higgins, Sir Richard's groom's wife, that the colonel and Miss Effingham did nothing but walk together, and that she actually saw them strolling alone in the wood in Mill Close. Now, I say, such conduct is perfectly disreputable."

"Be sure, Miss Jenks, Betty Higgins exaggerated. I make a rule never to believe more than exactly one-half of what I am told," said Mrs. Campbell, bustling away, heartily tired of Miss Jenks, and her acrid spite.

"Will you dance with me, Miss Effingham?" said Colonel Sutherland, approaching Mildred, as she sat by her mother's side, some half hour after he entered the room.

Mildred instantly arose.

"I was just entreating mamma to order the carriage," said she, hesitatingly.

"You cannot refuse my petition, Miss Effingham, after I have obeyed you—obeyed you to the very uttermost. Shall we join the waltz or the quadrille?" asked the colonel, a shade of deep sadness flitting across his brow.

"The quadrille."

"In the next room, then. Miss Effingham, I tell you I have obeyed your commands, and yet you will neither look at me, nor smile. Am I still unforgiven?"

"You have been staying at Moreton Place since we parted?" murmured Mildred, faintly.

"No, in its neighbourhood, with a connection, Mrs. St. Priest,——"

"And Miss Conway?"

"According to my promise, I made plenary confession. You ladies, Miss Effingham, seem strange, resentful beings; but I must do Maude justice to say she behaved admirably."

"She has pardoned your faithlessness, and you are then reconciled?" asked Mildred, anxiously.

"Yes—reconciled, if you will, Mil—Miss Effingham. Our engagement is not broken. My frank confession (for I concealed nothing) was a terrible blow to Miss Conway's pride, which I fear she will not soon forget; and as for myself, I have bidden so long a farewell to happiness as almost to hail her indifference or resentment, as it holds out to me a longer prospect of freedom."

Mildred looked displeased. She hastily glanced towards the earl, but he was talking to Lady Elvaston with as much *sang froid* as if Colonel Sutherland had not been present.

"Here come papa and Helen, doubtless, in search of me; mamma, I see, is going away. Colonel Sutherland, you must excuse my dancing with you," exclaimed Mildred, suddenly breaking the long silence which followed his last remark. "We are returning home early this evening, as Lord Alresford leaves us to-morrow."

"One question more. When is your marriage to take place, Mildred?"

"In about ten days," faltered Mildred; "immediately on the earl's return from Amesbury."

"I shall be far, far away from here by then, though my heart tells me I cannot bear banishment from your presence long," said the colonel, sorrowfully. "Miss Effingham, may I not lead you to the carriage?"

"No, no! far better not," hastily responded she, as Lord Elvaston and Helen came up.

Mildred silently took her father's arm, and in a few minutes she was swiftly wafted away again from the whirl of Mrs. Wedderbourne's splendid entertainment, and the dazzling glare of her illuminations.

"So it is really quite decided you leave us to-morrow?" said Mildred, holding out her hand to take leave of the earl for the night, as they stood alone together for a second in the drawing-room.

There was something in her tone which attracted Lord Alresford's attention. He looked earnestly in her face.

"Yes, indeed, Mildred, as you know. But why do you ask?" replied he, gravely and gently.

"Oh, nothing; for no especial reason, my lord," cried Miss Effingham, hastily withdrawing her hand; and, taking her candle, she quitted the room.

CHAPTER XII.

BEFORE THE WEDDING.

THE following morning, the party at the Priory was much diminished. Lord Alresford, at a very early hour, set off on his journey, after partaking of a solitary breakfast: a meal Mildred gladly would have shared, had she not been restrained by the uncomfortable feeling that her company might be considered intrusive; consequently, despite Lady Elvaston's gentle hints and final entreaty, that at least she would descend and bid farewell to the earl, she contented herself with sorrowfully watching his retreating equipage from the window of her dressing-room, as it wound from the porch of the mansion. Sir Gerard Baynton also, unwilling to intrude on the last few days Mildred had to spend with her parents, accepted the oft-repeated invitation of the Tennysons; and returned home with them from Mrs. Wedderbourne's ball.

Lady Elvaston appeared sad—Mildred looked grave; and even Helen's lively face and smile were sobered into serious pensiveness, as they took their seats at the breakfast-table. Lord Elvaston likewise seemed to find matter of more than usual interest in his newspaper, and ate his breakfast in silence.

It was at length Lady Elvaston who broke the long spell; for no one appeared inclined to hazard an observation.

"You do not think also of leaving us this morning, my dear Helen; you will surely stay with Mildred until——" and Lady Elvaston turned away her head, unable even to allude to her child's approaching departure.

"I will do exactly what is most pleasant to you and Mildred, dearest Lady Elvaston. I need not, I am sure, say what my own inclination prompts me to do!" replied Helen affectionately.

"Then you will remain here," rejoined Miss Effingham, quickly.

And Helen staid at the Priory.

Only one more little week had now to glide away, and Mildred was then to become a bride! Her position had stolen so insensibly upon her—there had been such a total absence of bustle and preparation—and even all allusion to the approaching event was so studiously avoided in her presence, and all outward things so regularly pursued their accustomed tenor, that poor Mildred was absolutely astounded when she reflected that seven short days were to usher in the most im-

portant event of her life ; that in little more than seven times twenty-four hours she was to take a solemn vow to love and obey one whom she dreaded as a stern censor : one whom her perverse imagination accused of harbouring contempt, if not positive dislike, towards herself. For the first day or two, while alone with Helen, she did nothing but weep ; and when in the presence of her parents, her swollen eyelids, and the excitement, and forced gaiety of her manner, sent a keen pang to her mother's heart. Yet had Mildred been compelled to a little self-examination, she would have found it a matter of some difficulty to account for the source of her abundant tears. Her feelings towards the earl were inexplicable to herself. Cut to the quick by the cool *nonchalance* of his manner, wounded deeply by his occasional neglect, Mildred set a rigid watch over her words and actions. She haughtily refused to let him read the heart he disdained to win ; and carefully suppressed every outward demonstration that might lead him to suppose his indifference was not returned by like indifference on her part : yet now had Lord Alresford stepped forward and offered to terminate her suspense and anxiety by the dissolution of their engagement, she would have recoiled shudderingly from his proposal.

In the paroxysms of despair which swept athwart her mind, she accused the earl of haughty insensibility ; and her cheek burned as she indignantly recalled the frigid, unloverlike distance of his habitual bearing : forgetful how often she had repelled his affection, and that now, if she wished all to be well between them again it was for her to evince, by a gentle winning deportment, that a change had indeed been wrought in her sentiments. Unfortunately Mildred thought not thus. The petted idol of all around her, she had invariably seen the world at her feet, and her spirit chafed to find her beauty, wit, and a thousand attractive qualities powerless to vanquish the stoicism of her betrothed, or to make him, at her behest, both forget and forgive her past infidelities ; and, fatally for her present peace, instead of attributing his coldness to displeasure at her perpetual caprice, and striving to amend, she sought its solution in an assumed attachment to the Lady Catherine Neville.

Somewhat comforted by Helen's vigorous exhortation, Mildred, after the expiration of a couple of days, recovered a portion of her serenity. They then walked together, revisited and lingered in every favourite haunt, and, arm-in-arm, strolled together through the beautiful gardens. A great part of their time was devoted to Lady Elvaston ; but none could adequately divine the magnitude of the sacrifice she was about to make, or how fervently, in the solitude of her chamber, did she commend her beloved child to the keeping

of Him whose mercy and love so tempers every trial, that what presently appears most hard to bear, eventually conduces to some great permanent good.

Nevertheless, it must not be supposed Mildred's wedding, though rather precipitate a one, was totally devoid of that agreeable excitement and bustle which usually usher in so happy an event. Mantua-makers and modistes, set to work by Lord Elvaston's munificent liberality, racked their powers of invention to provide the most elegant and costly wardrobe; and unbounded was Aglaë's rapture as she unpacked case after case, and spread out for her young mistress's inspection their varied contents. Every train brought a profusion of beautiful baubles, presents from distant friends; and one fine morning a messenger from the earl's jeweller in town arrived at the Priory, the bearer of a magnificent *parure*, part of the family diamonds which Lord Alresford had had reset for his bride.

"All very superb. A most splendid marriage gift, Helen! But Edward Sutherland would have given these jewels to me with his own hand," was Mildred's comment, as she pettishly pushed the glittering *ecrin* from her across the table to her friend.

Mildred had written to the earl once since his departure. She had done so without remark of any kind to Helen; and on the fifth day after his farewell, as they were once more assembled for the morning meal, his answer was placed in her hand. She hastily tore asunder the envelope, and perused the letter without comment; but Helen thought her beautiful face appeared a shade graver, and there was a kind of nervous impatience in the hurried mode in which she folded it and transferred it to the pocket of her apron. However, she said nothing, but presently arose from the table and stood silently by the window for some moments; she then turned to Helen, and proposed that they should set out on a long rambling excursion, which had been in contemplation for the last two days, and on their return call, *en passant*, at the Rectory, and see Mrs. Northcote. Helen, who plainly perceived her friend was struggling with some pique she would rather not divulge in her mother's presence, readily complied; and soon they were both equipped for their walk.

The day was delightful; the atmosphere, buoyant and transparent, interposed not a single cloud to mar the brightness of the deep-blue sky; and the soft, flowery turf yielded pleasantly to the tread, as they slowly traversed the park, and turned into one of those good old-fashioned green lanes, with mossy banks and tall hedgerows, which, happily, even in this age of would-be improvement, are still to be found in some of the more secluded districts of merry Old England.

Mildred walked on silently for some time, and Helen did not care to interrupt her reverie ; for she too, if the truth must be told, felt in a mood the reverse of communicative.

"In what a very taciturn humour we must both have risen this morning, Helen. I verily believe, since we first set out, we have not uttered half a dozen words. What are you thinking about?" at length exclaimed Mildred.

"You have asked me a very puzzling question, Mildred, which I do not know how to answer. Shall I retort, and put the same query to you?"

"Ah, yes, Helen, my meditations have now reached their culminating point, and therefore can only centre on one theme. But I know what your thoughts were also : you were musing a little on the manifold eccentricities of my betrothed lord, a great deal about Sir Gerard Baynton, and at length your reverie subsided into a moderate degree of wonderment as to what the earl and myself could possibly have to impart which would not brook the delay of a few days, considering the very cool terms on which we parted. Now, Helen, I will wager I have guessed correctly, by the demure look of propriety you are putting on," said Mildred, with some of her former liveliness.

"To say that I felt no surprise or curiosity as to the purport of your correspondence, Mildred, would be an untruth ; so I will not attempt to refute your clairvoyante faculties on this point : though, after all, it was an absurd feeling, for, with your marriage so near, there must be many things on which you ought to be consulted."

"*Must* and *ought*, my dearest Helen, are very fine sounding words ; but I assure you, I am far from presuming to offer an opinion on any of his lordship's arrangements. The object of my letter was to prefer a petition, which I honestly confess, with many more, I had not courage to request in person."

"Well?"

"Well!" rejoined Miss Effingham, haughtily, "this morning's post brings me an absolute refusal ! A charming foretaste of matrimonial felicity ; is it not, Helen?"

"I am indeed astonished," exclaimed Helen, after a few minutes' pause, during which Miss Effingham's eyes were riveted on her face. I could not have supposed it possible ; unless, dear Mildred, in one of your desperate moods, you requested something very unreasonable."

"You shall judge of the propriety of my request ; though, perhaps, you may secretly accuse me of a want of delicacy in disregarding your feelings, dear Helen. Extraordinary events, however, require extraordinary remedies, and I am resolved not a shadow shall interpose between me and one whom I love so much as yourself. I wrote to the earl to ask his permission to

invite you, my dearest Helen, to visit us at Amesbury immediately after our marriage—a request he has chosen most arbitrarily to deny for the present!” said Mildred, angrily.

The blood mounted to Helen’s brow.

“What you tell me pains me more than I can express,” replied she, after an uncomfortable pause of a few seconds. “Does Lord Alresford assign any reason for my exclusion from Amesbury, Mildred?”

“None! Except, indeed, he condescendingly adds, that at the expiration of four months he will be happy to receive you as his guest.” Helen walked gravely on. “But I assure you, dearest Helen,” continued she, anxiously, “the earl couches his refusal in such very flattering terms as regards yourself, and descants so eloquently on your many admirable qualities, that you will be quite appeased for the apparent slight on perusing his letter;—so what his motive can be in refusing me the consolation of your society, I cannot divine!”

“But I can, Mildred: I see it clearly, and the earl is right! I beseech you, therefore, do not let any puerile resentment defeat his purpose,” exclaimed Helen at length, earnestly. “He wishes to win your precious affection, and thinks that more likely to be obtained without the intervention of a third person; for you know when left *tête-à-tête* dependent on each other, with no one for either party to fall back upon, must necessarily facilitate a better understanding.”

“If I could but think his motive to be what you say, Helen! but you are totally mistaken. Humiliating as it may be to confess, Lord Alresford’s approval and interest are centred in another: though I do not mean to say all might not have been well, but for that unfortunate affair with Edward Sutherland,” rejoined Mildred, tears of wounded pride starting to her eyes.

“Oh, Mildred, you know of old I cannot agree with you here! Only smile on the earl as you once did on Colonel Sutherland, and soon all will be well between you; and in the meantime the novelty of your position will prevent you dwelling so pertinaciously on the past.”

“Well, there is some comfort in the thought that this is a world of compensation; so what I lose on one side I shall probably gain on another!” ejaculated Mildred, with a sigh.

“We shall see! I predict the earl will make an admirable husband; which is something gained, in my opinion,” replied Helen, with a smile.

“Perhaps, Helen, ‘*Tanto buono che val niente*,’ as the Italians say. But let us change the subject: what did you think of Mrs. Rayland?”

“I only exchanged half a dozen words with her; she appeared to me pretty, elegant, and good-natured.”

"But dreadfully affected. Her manner struck me likewise as excessively free, especially when conversing with gentlemen."

"Probably she has contracted this familiar deportment (which, by-the-bye, Mildred, I did not observe) from long residence abroad."

"Perhaps! I wonder whether she at all resembles her cousin, Lady Catherine Neville!"

"You will soon be able to satisfy yourself on this point: but I should fancy not, for I understand Lady Catherine might almost be taken for a Spanish beauty——"

"I only meant in manners and deportment," interrupted Mildred hastily. "Mrs. Rayland's fanciful, deprecating air, when speaking to gentlemen, proves her at any rate a great flirt: and if Lady Catherine's much vaunted beauty is not overrated, I should imagine this to be the only possible *point de ressemblance* between the cousins."

"You have made up your mind it seems that Lady Catherine is a flirt, Mildred?"

"Perhaps the term 'flirt' is rather too strong an expression, but I certainly consider her a coquette in the widest sense of the word, Helen," replied Mildred, resolutely.

"It is difficult to judge. I do not think we either of us know enough of her to pass so severe a censure. Sir Gerard speaks highly of her, and he has no reason that I can discern for giving her a more high-flown character than she deserves," argued Helen.

"Except that Sir Gerard, blinded by the well-turned panegyrics of his infallible friend, believes what he is told; and I fear has also thrown dust into your eyes, Helen," replied Miss Effingham, laughing. "By-the-bye, I have never had time to inquire into the beginning of that friendship which now has ripened into such hot alliance, Helen."

"I first knew Sir Gerard when I was a little, unruly sprite of six years old; and many were the mischievous pranks we played together. Papa quitted Weldon when I was nine; so, dear Mildred, your imagination will not have much to feed upon, as eleven long years intervened without my hearing or seeing anything of my quondam playmate: indeed, until I heard of his expected arrival at the Priory, I had almost forgotten such a being existed."

"All very fine, my dear Helen!" exclaimed Mildred, with a saucy laugh. Then she added, in a graver tone, her smile vanishing, "I fervently trust, Helen, my redoubtable earl has not formed any plan for honouring some unknown damsel with Sir Gerard's hand: as on many occasions his lordship has displayed such disagreeable tenacity of purpose, that I should actually despair of frustrating his designs."

"As far as I am concerned you may very safely spare yourself any anxiety, Mildred, on Sir Gerard's account."

"Well, my dear Helen, we will not argue the point; but I may, of course, be permitted to retain my own opinion. I should fancy Sir Gerard is now heartily sick of Settringham, and its uproarious hilarity, and will be right glad to return to the Priory to-morrow. Does he ever talk to you about Lady Catherine, Helen? I would give much to obtain a clearer insight into her disposition; but I have never perused a line of her correspondence with Lord Alresford: contrary, you know, to your prediction, Helen," continued Miss Effingham, negligently.

Helen smiled, as she noticed the ever-recurring topic of her friend's meditations.

"Yes, Sir Gerard frequently mentions her," replied she, briefly; for Helen found it did more harm than good to retail conversations on this very debatable personage, as Miss Effingham, with perverse petulance, was sure to seize on any discrepancy in the recital, and thus distort facts to the very opposite of what was intended.

"I do not know why I asked you this stupid question, Helen; it can be of very little consequence to me what Lady Catherine is like, rejoined Mildred, in a tone of pique at Helen's silence. "But here comes Miss Jenks to infuse an amiable diversity in our ideas," continued she, as they emerged from the lane into a large meadow, through which ran a footpath leading straight to the Rectory gate.

The prim, demure-looking spinster quickened her pace when she perceived the two young ladies, as the gleanings of her morning's prowl usually furnished a delectable mass of gossip for the edification of some village tea-party; invitations to which social meal she seldom lacked: as, unhappily, the inherent love of "hearing something new," prompts people in general (however much they may inwardly despise the character) to refrain from treating the scandalous busybody with the contempt and aversion so richly his due.

"Good-morning, young ladies. I hope I find you both well this lovely day? I trust her ladyship has recovered the fatigue of the Dornton gala?"

After being assured of the flourishing state of their health, and Lady Elvaston's also, Miss Jenks perceiving that her auditors were not inclined for any very lengthened parley, immediately had recourse to her strategic faculties.

"I see you are in a hurry. I suppose bound for the Rectory, to visit that poor child, Lucy: those Northcotes are a strange, sickly set; however, if you have no objection, Miss Effingham, I should like to walk with you to the gate. May I do so?"

"Certainly, if you please," replied Mildred.

"Well, Helen, how did you enjoy the ball? I have not seen you since," asked Miss Jenks.

"Very much, indeed."

"I think it seemed to give general satisfaction, and everyone must agree our hostess was uncommonly attentive and hospitable. I always remark one meets with proper courtesy from those persons who boast of gentle blood, and Mrs. Wedderbourne springs from a very ancient Indian family. Poor woman, how she glories in the pomps of this world! I understand, Miss Effingham, she intends to give the *pendant* of last week's fête, when her niece catches a coronet."

"Indeed!"

"Caroline Vincent is a very charming girl, and likely to do exceedingly well. She appears a wonderful favourite with the gentlemen. I thought Sir Gerard Baynton paid her an immense deal of attention. I am sure I watched him stand behind her chair full half an hour, imploring her to eat an ice: for, *entre nous*, caprice is the foible of our little friend. Did you not think he admired her, Miss Campbell?"

"Sir Gerard an admirer of Caroline Vincent! no, certainly not," promptly responded Miss Effingham, quickening her pace.

"Perhaps, then, he found *les beaux yeux de sa cassette* more inviting than the young lady's own. Miss Vincent is no great favourite of yours, I presume, from your tone, Miss Effingham?" pursued Miss Jenks; revolving in her mind, how she should turn Mildred's expected admission of the fact, into a stepping-stone for further prying.

"I hope you have received pleasant news lately from your relatives in Ireland, and from the bride, Lady O'Lawlor," interrupted Helen adroitly, as Mildred turned a deaf ear to Miss Jenks's query.

"Thank you, Miss Campbell, my tidings are very good indeed. Such an unclouded honeymoon as my dear Arabella's seldom falls to a girl's lot—such a perfect unison of hearts!" said Miss Jenks, maliciously glancing at Mildred.

"I fear we have taken you very much out of your way, Miss Jenks," observed Helen, as, greatly to her delight, they now stood before the door leading into the Rectory garden.

"Oh, pray do not mention such a thing. By-the-bye, did you know, Miss Effingham, that the—Dragoons left Stanmore yesterday? There was such a lamentation in the town; for, really, they were a fine, orderly set of fellows. I went to the Queen's Head to see the regiment pass, and was really grieved to take leave of that noble, handsome Colonel Sutherland. I hope he may be happy with his bride elect: though I must say it was very shabby of him to deceive us all so long.

Good-morning, young ladies, I won't detain you longer. Miss Effingham, I shall be sure to secure a good place in the church, to witness a certain happy event next week. Pray, make my respectful compliments to her ladyship," and Miss Jenks very reluctantly wended her steps towards the village.

Mildred and Helen exchanged glances only ; for at the noise of the falling latch, Mr. Northcote, who was amusing himself with clipping trees in the adjoining shrubbery, came forward to greet them. Mildred laughingly rallied him on his known propensity—often very much to good Mrs. Northcote's intense dismay—of vigorously slashing away with his knife *à tort et à travers*, lopping off boughs by dozens, on the very spot where it was intended they should form a leafy covert to some unsightly wall or disagreeable object ; and then, leaving the worthy rector to the enjoyment of his favourite amusement, she proceeded with Helen to the sitting-room, where they found Mrs. Northcote.

CHAPTER XIII.

MARRIAGE BELLS.

THE sun rose brightly on Mildred's bridal morn. The flowers and leaves, mellowed in the soft, warm light, lay with expanded petals glistening and exhaling forth rich perfume on the parterres round the mansion. Beyond, the park stretched far as the eye could range, fresh, verdant, and chequered here and there with broad fantastic shadows, cast by stately avenues of chestnut and oak trees ; under which countless starry dew-drops still lingered, sparkling ever and anon in the sunbeam, as the light breeze swayed the branches to and fro. Within the mansion, however, all was bustle and excitement. Smiling soubrettes tripped hastily along the corridors, each intent on her lady's toilette, and almost at her wit's end, as carriage after carriage drove up and set down at the porch ; for the hour fixed for the ceremony was an early one, the earl having arranged to take his bride at once to Amesbury, and Mildred wishing for a delay of a few hours, before setting off on her journey. Lord Alresford also had made it his especial request, that the ceremony might be performed in the most private manner consistent with the rank of the bride : a desire too consonant with poor Mildred's feelings not to meet with her hearty concurrence. The invitations, therefore, were limited to her nearest connections (who were requested to meet at the

Priory the day previously), and the families of the young ladies asked to officiate as bridesmaids.

Soon after the company assembled, Helen, arrayed in her very becoming bridesmaid's costume, entered Mildred's dressing-room, looking fresh and fair as a rose bathed in dewdrops, with the blush raised by Sir Gerard's whispered commendation still glowing on her cheek. Lady Elvaston had just quitted her daughter; for from very early dawn both she and Helen met by Mildred's pillow: nor had the watchful mother since suffered her to remain a moment alone. When Helen appeared, Miss Effingham was standing motionless before a tall pier-glass whilst Aglaë added the last touches to her *recherché* toilette. She was pale, though composed: and, unresistingly, suffered the delighted Aglaë to exert her fancy, without remark or remonstrance. She stood with her back to Helen; and the soft, rich folds of her veil drooped from her wreath of orange flowers almost to the ground. She hastily turned and smiled: yet there was a quick glistening moisture in her full, dark eye when she returned Helen's embrace. Proudly, and with throbbing cheek, Helen gazed on her: she felt few hearts could long resist beauty such as Mildred's: and we know she never quite despaired of the earl.

"Dear Mildred, how well you look!" said Helen, in tones of unfeigned admiration, as she took from Aglaë's hand the rich jewel destined to loop up the lace round Miss Effingham's slender throat, and attached it with her own fairy fingers.

"Do I? I am glad you think so, Helen."

"Lord Elvaston will be here to lead you down in a very few minutes, dearest Mildred. Your bridesmaids are arrived, and everybody appears assembled in the saloon; for, when I came up stairs, it was crowded," said Helen, in as gay and unconcerned a tone as she could command; she had been specially enjoined by Lady Elvaston not to utter a syllable likely to endanger Mildred's self-possession.

"What an admirable actress you would make, Helen!" replied Mildred, sadly: "you need not, however, be afraid I shall treat any of you with a scene. I have not so long schooled myself to resignation to fail at this most critical period. One word, Helen: have you spoken to Lord Alresford this morning?"

"Yes: he asked after you most earnestly; nay, even tenderly."

A smile of incredulity passed over Miss Effingham's lovely face.

"Do you remember my lonely musings in the boudoir yesterday evening, Helen?" asked she, turning away.

"I do. But I also remember, Mildred, I heard you distinctly state, in Lord Alresford's presence, that you wished to be alone," replied Helen.

Mildred did not reply, but slowly drew on her gloves.

"Do I look very pale, Helen?" asked she, approaching the mirror again. "I wish it was all over. There is something terrible in the thought of being the object of everybody's observation," said she, quickly, while her lip quivered nervously.

"With the exception, perhaps, of looking a shade paler than ordinary—the recognised privilege of brides, you know, Mildred—you appear to me as usual."

"I suppose I shall not see dear mamma again until it is all over: her courage is not so great as mine. Hark, Helen! I think I hear papa's footstep in the passage. He is coming to fetch me!" exclaimed Mildred, her cheek growing whiter still, and her eyes riveted themselves on the door.

"Courage, dearest Mildred!" whispered Helen, as when the door opened, and her much loved and indulgent father appeared, Miss Effingham's vaunted fortitude seemed on the point of forsaking her. Tears suffused her eyes; and the hand which Helen clasped, shook nervously. Lord Elvaston's face expressed great distress, but he wisely refrained from sympathy.

"Forgive me, dear papa! I am quite well now, and ready to go. First, however, I wish to say to you, in Helen's presence, that you have latterly vainly tried to dissuade me from this marriage, which you imagine utterly repugnant to me; but of my own free will I have persisted in it: indeed, I do not hesitate to assert that my future happiness depends on my this day becoming Lord Alresford's wife," said Miss Effingham in a firm voice, rising. "Now, papa, kiss me for the last, last time that I shall wholly and entirely belong to you!" continued she, flinging her arms round her father's neck, and with difficulty suppressing the sobs of anguish which shook her frame.

"God bless you, my darling child! Had I not the firmest trust in Alresford's truth and honour, never would I place your hand in his!" said Lord Elvaston, struggling with his emotion, as he folded his daughter to his bosom.

Mildred then silently placed her arm within her father's, and they descended.

Followed by six blooming bridesmaids, Miss Effingham presently entered the saloon where her friends awaited her; and Helen's eyes beamed with joy as she fancied she read pride and approbation in the earl's glance towards his bride: a conclusion confirmed in her own mind by the warmth of his greeting. She had little time, however, for congratulation; and before she well comprehended how the change of scene was affected, found herself standing behind Mildred in the chancel of the humble village church of Greysdon, with the soothing, cheerful voice of Mr. Northcote sounding pleasantly

in her ears. Mildred was still pale ; but her tones, though low, were firm and audible. The earl looked handsome and self-possessed as ever ; and Helen, as her eye encountered the merry glance of Sir Gerard Baynton, smiled also ; for, after all, Mildred's wedding was not the lugubrious affair fancy pictured. Soon the marriage service concluded, the bridal train swept from the altar to the vestry, and from the vestry to the carriages at the church-porch ; and Helen, leaning on Sir Gerard's arm, speedily stood by Mildred's side in the self-same saloon they had so recently quitted, listening to the congratulations poured on the bride from the circle of pink, blue, green and white robed damsels and dames around.

The ensuing *déjeuner* in nothing differed from the routine of wedding breakfasts in general ; which invariably are embarrassing things to the parties most concerned, little edifying to the speech-makers, and wearisome to the remaining guests. Therefore, after thus passing an ordeal of an hour and a half, or more, Mildred was at length permitted to escape with her friend Helen to the retirement of her own apartment.

"So it is now all over, Helen ! For better, for worse, I have given myself to Lord Alresford !" exclaimed she breathlessly, sinking on an ottoman.

"My darling Mildred, may you be happy !" and Helen knelt by her side, and threw her arms around her ; for tears now streamed in torrents down Mildred's fair face.

"Helen, strange and inconsistent as it may appear, I would not, if I could, cancel the vows I have just uttered !" exclaimed Mildred, sweeping the ringlets from her wet cheek. "But I shudder at the very anticipation of all I am going to endure : what long months must elapse before I shall be able to erase from *his* heart the bitter memory of my past folly and caprice—before I can hold that place in his esteem which Lady Catherine Neville does ; before he can again confide in me and love me !"

"Be sure he does—he will !" murmured Helen.

"If I should find he still prizes Lady Catherine's society more than mine !" exclaimed Mildred, shudderingly.

"Be comforted, Mildred. Do not conjure up such impossibilities," rejoined Helen, soothingly.

"I hope it may prove so, Helen," said Mildred, rising, and wandering round the room. "How desolate everything looks !" added she, with a sigh, as she missed many familiar trifles, and her eye glanced from the disordered toilette at the open imperial on the floor. "As soon, Helen, as I receive permission from the earl, I shall immediately write to you to fly to me ; and then, I think together, we will contrive to make even Amesbury comfortable," continued she, restlessly pursuing her wanderings.

"Yes; what joy it will be to meet again, dear Mildred!" replied Helen, as the pendule over the chimney struck two.

Mildred started; for the minutes were fast flying towards the hour when she was to bid farewell to the home of her childhood.

At the same moment Aglaë entered the room, weary of awaiting a summons, to warn her young mistress it was high time to make the requisite alterations in her attire—to exchange her bridal for her travelling costume. When this was effected Mildred returned to her mother's dressing-room; Helen remained where she was, feeling too great a weight on her spirits to join the gay party assembled on the lawn below.

In about three-quarters of an hour Lord Alresford's travelling carriage drove up, and presently the earl himself made his appearance in the boudoir in quest of his bride. Ere Helen had time to account for her friend's absence, Lord and Lady Elvaston and their daughter entered the apartment. Mildred leant on her father's arm, and though her veil was down, Helen's quick eye discerned traces of tears on her cheek. Lady Elvaston wept; but insensibly a smile beamed over her gentle features, as she listened eagerly to a few rapid words from the earl's lips, as they followed together down stairs. Mildred exchanged hasty greetings with the numerous guests in the hall and vestibule as she passed, and again pressing her lips to her mother's and Helen's cheeks, she sprang into the carriage—one brief glance at the hurried, anxious faces of the dear ones she was leaving behind, and Lady Alresford was whirled away.

Sunk back in the corner of the carriage, and feeling too miserable to be capable of the slightest effort, it was some very considerable time before Mildred ventured to raise her eyes to her companion. She then perceived that his eyes were riveted upon her, and uncomfortably conscious how very indifferently she was enacting her rôle of bride, she blushed and turned away her head. A smile parted the earl's lips—one of those smiles which had so captivated Helen on the day of her first introduction.

"I have been watching the expression of your countenance for the last half hour, Mildred. You are looking and also feeling, I have no doubt, very forlorn and aggrieved," said he at length, taking one of her small hands in his.

This was said in a tone of such genuine kindness, that tears unconsciously trembled in her eyes; but she could not deny the fact. Ah, had she then but courageously and candidly avowed it, and its cause! As it was, she suffered the earl to retain her hand, and simply replied,—

"I shall be better soon—very soon."

With a degree of consideration that touched her heart,

Lord Alresford then spoke of the dear relatives she had left behind ; and, relieved by being able to give utterance to the regrets which tortured her, she felt a burden removed from her spirits. Insensibly, the earl led the conversation into other channels, and such was the fascination of his manner, the extent of his information, and his evident desire to please her, that Mildred found herself at length sitting in earnest discourse ; her beautiful face radiant with smiles, her bright eyes beaming, and feeling more at ease than she deemed it possible a few hours ago.

Twilight was fast blending all things in her soft mysterious shadows, when Lord Alresford's equipage passed the lodges of the grand entrance to Amesbury Park. Mildred felt her spirits sink again as they swiftly approached the mansion, now whirling along gloomy avenues of trees, whose towering branches, entwined and arched, excluded all but the feeblest gleams of twilight ; now emerging again into the dim expanse of park, while here and there clumps of tall trees, like shadowy ghosts, flitted past the carriage windows, shrouded in the gathering obscurity. Lord Alresford, likewise, was silent : while Mildred's heart beat rapidly, and almost audibly, as the carriage at length stopped before the door of the mansion. The earl handed her out, and in another second she stood under the roof of her new home.

Dinner, which was served almost immediately, passed off with less restraint than Mildred once would have declared probable ; and some two hours after their arrival, the earl and his bride were seated *tête-à-tête*, in a large, well lighted room with a conservatory adjoining. For some short period, conversation was tolerably well sustained on Mildred's part. Insensibly, however, her spirits began to flag ; and her thoughts reverted to her home, and the friends from whom she had so recently parted. Her eyes roamed slowly round the splendidly furnished apartment, and then imagination pictured the drawing-room at the Priory, and its inmates ; she thought of her much loved mother, of her father, of Helen, till tears sprang to her eyes ; and, completely overpowered, she hastily pushed back her *fauteuil*, and strolled into the conservatory : unobserved of Lord Alresford, who stood with his arm on the chimney-piece opposite to her chair, silently watching the progress of her reverie. The fresh fragrance and beauty of the plants around soon revived her spirits, and she had scarce paced the length of the conservatory before she became sensible that her sudden silence and flight, without word or excuse, were not likely to receive a courteous construction from the fastidious earl ; hurriedly, therefore, she retraced her steps : but Lord Alresford was no longer in the saloon. She advanced, and stood motionless on the hearth-rug for a few minutes ; but

still the earl came not again. Glancing anxiously around, her eye presently fell on a letter placed on a small table near the chair from which she had risen. Mildred took it up—it was addressed, in the earl's hand, to the Countess of Alresford. The few letters which had lately passed between them had caused her such exquisite pain, that she almost shuddered as she tore open the envelope.

It ran thus :—

“ MY DEAR MILDRED,

“ When I insisted on the immediate celebration of our marriage, it was not with the intent of tyrannising over your feelings, or of forcing you into the arms of a husband whom your heart repulses. Your own free, spontaneous act reconfirmed our engagement; and, confiding in your positive assertions that the past of which I had to complain was but a fleeting fancy—the caprice of a day—I trusted that you would not have taken this important step without serious commune with your own heart, or without feeling a certainty that you could eventually bestow your affection, where you again deliberately pledged your hand. Unhappily, these hopes have not been realised. I have not been able to inspire you with that love and confidence which can alone hallow the near and indissoluble tie that now unites us : at least, I can only so interpret the marked avoidance and alienation you evince. Until your heart, therefore, Mildred, truthfully confirms the solemn vow you have this day uttered, regard me only as your best friend and brother. The only return I at present exact or require from you, is your full and unreserved confidence.”

The paper dropped from Mildred's hands. The earl refused, then, to acknowledge her as his wife ; and cruelly threw all the blame on her ! For a moment she stood absorbed in silent, bitter reverie. She then stooped, and hastily took up the letter from the floor, and once more read it through : presently she hid her fair face in her hands, and wept. Could she not retaliate the charge of daily alienation ? Had he ever given her reason to suppose that he had thoroughly forgiven her inconstancy during his absence abroad ? Had he ever deigned to explain to her, his betrothed, the exact degree of his intimacy with the much-lauded Lady Catherine ? or, had he attempted to probe her feelings respecting himself ? And now, the conviction of his indifference fell like a bolt of ice on poor Mildred's heart ; for she was beginning to be too familiar with the torment of suspicion to believe it possible that, when a word would terminate suspense, such word should long remain unasked.

She was at length aroused from her painful reverie by the entrance of Aglaë. The *soubrette* made a kind of little affected

start when she perceived the solitude of her mistress ; but, restrained by the sadness of Mildred's face and manner, she repressed for the moment her flow of volubility : which, nevertheless, burst forth with redoubled energy, some half-hour afterwards.

Lady Alresford was, however, in no mood to encourage her loquacity, and briefly responded in monosyllables.

Aglaë heaved a deep sigh.

"Mais, par exemple, c'est la plus drôle de noce that I have ever seen!" exclaimed she, at length, indignantly. "Voilà Madame qui reste toute seule, et Monseigneur qui s'enferme dans son cabinet! C'est assez à faire mourir de chagrin! I wonder what Milédi Elvaston and Miss Helène would say."

Mildred made no reply ; and after Aglaë had grumbled and fidgeted through the usual routine of her evening's duty, she quietly dismissed her.

As soon as her maid closed the door, Mildred threw herself back in her chair, and was presently buried in thought.

After a time she arose and gazed round the large lonely apartment ; feeling more desolate than she had ever done in her life. She then approached the window, and, pushing aside the heavy velvet curtain, threw up the sash, with the somewhat comforting assurance that she would at least find a familiar friend in the sweet night breeze which fanned her cheek, and gently waved the fresh boughs and grass. The plaintive notes of the nightingale sounded from the thick covert of a neighbouring grove, mingling at times with the shrill bark of foxes, and the lowing of cattle. With her head resting on her hand, there she remained motionless, absorbed in meditation, till the soft gray twilight gradually rolled away, and vanished before the opening dawn.

So ended Mildred Effingham's bridal day.

CHAPTER XIV.

MORE SUSPICIONS.

It was with feelings of no slight embarrassment and constraint that Mildred, on the following morning, prepared to meet her inflexible spouse at the breakfast-table. She lingered so long over, and evinced such strange caprice at, her toilette, that poor Aglaë's patience never was more severely tried. Nevertheless, Mildred might have spared herself the pain of revolving how it would best become her dignity to comport herself, or what she should say, for there was something so very kind, frank, and cordial, in the way the earl advanced to greet her; something so encouraging in the manner he took her hand and led her to her seat, that she at once felt at ease, and enjoyed the beautiful prospect and bright sunshine pouring in from the windows to her heart's content.

The meal ended, Mildred's first occupation was to go over her new abode, accompanied by Lord Alresford. She paused, delighted, as she passed from one noble suite of apartments to another, and admired the valuable and rare articles of *virtù* profusely scattered about. Before the pictures, also, she could have remained for hours in mute admiration; and many a rich treat did she promise herself hereafter. One portrait, a Circe, attracted her especial attention; she paused before it. The expression of the fair enchantress's face was so pensive, and, withal, so lovely, and it was painted with such exquisite finish and colour, that Mildred loudly expressed her delight.

"It is a study of Lady Catherine Neville's, and I think one of her most successful attempts. It was painted at Rome about two years ago," replied Lord Alresford.

Mildred cast another hasty glance on the beautiful Circe, and passed on.

"And now, Mildred, I must show you a room long since dedicated to your use," said Lord Alresford, ushering his bride into a small apartment, surpassing her most fairy dreams of ease, splendour, and luxury.

"Oh, how beautiful—how very beautiful!" exclaimed Mildred, as she flitted like a butterfly from one object to another, admiring everything—from the exquisite Sèvres vases and bijouterie, to the pale blue satin draperies, as they rested on the polished parquet. All the old familiar objects that surrounded her in her boudoir at the Priory here greeted her again. There were her favourite books, her work-table, her drawing-desk: bouquets of fresh flowers stood on the tables;

even her most peculiar fancies and tastes seemed consulted. From one of the windows, a flight of steps descended into a lovely garden, brilliant as a rainbow, with flowers of the most varied hues. In the centre, clusters of parterres, glowing with fragrant roses, surrounded a small, bubbling fountain, which murmured pleasantly as the clear, sparkling water towered high in the air, and dashed again into the marble basin, scattering showers of pearly spray on the delicate pink petals blooming around its margin.

Mildred turned towards the earl ; her eyes humid with tears of pleasure—pleasure, not alone that he had wrought for her so fairly a bower, not that he had lavished upon her a luxury almost profuse, but that the careful regard shown to her taste and habits throughout, evinced, at least, that she had succeeded in kindling his interest, and that he must keenly have observed, to perform so well.

“Do not thank me, Mildred. If you are pleased, believe me, I am sufficiently rewarded,” said the earl, arresting the eager acknowledgments which trembled on her lips.

She turned away disappointed. A gloom all at once encircled her fair garden ; the earl’s words appeared to sever his participation in her delight : he disdained her thanks. Silently she took his offered arm, and passing the tall hedge of rhododendrons and roses, the boundary line of her garden, they slowly wended their way towards the conservatories.

A fortnight elapsed, and Mildred, in her daily increasing pleasure in the earl’s society, nearly forgot her grievances. He was the companion of her walks and drives ; they read and conversed together upon every topic but the one which weighed upon her heart : that she carefully avoided, and shunned the very mention of the name of the Lady Catherine Neville. Rigidly, too, did she set a jealous watch over her words and actions, lest any unguarded moment should expose to the penetrating eyes of the earl the pang his indifference cost her. While he was content to play only the companion and friend, Mildred’s proud heart resolved that no outward symptom, no weakness, should betray she would have it other. As yet, she had neither seen nor heard anything since her arrival at Amesbury, of the Lady Catherine, or of any of her neighbours : Lord Alresford had never even paid a single visit to Wardour Court. Instead of being pleased, however, at this tribute to her companionable qualities, Mildred had the inconceivable perversity to be secretly dissatisfied ; and whenever she perceived a slight shade creep over the handsome brow of her lord, she was sure inwardly to attribute it to his pining desire to be restored to the society of his beautiful ward.

One day, as she was standing by his side, pencil in hand, planning and superintending the cutting out of some flower

beds on the lawn, the sound of carriage-wheels rolling through the park towards the spot where they stood, brought a vivid flush to her cheek. She turned inquiringly to the earl, as presently a very low phaeton, drawn by two piebald ponies, came in sight, and swept swiftly up towards the house.

"A visitor to you, Mildred. I suppose people imagine they have given us ample time to weary of our *tête-à-tête*. What do you say?" said Lord Alresford with a smile, as he stooped and restored her pencil, which had fallen to the ground.

"Oh, I am sorry—very! But who is the lady in the phaeton? I observed she waved her handkerchief as she passed us," said Mildred, hastily; for it flashed across her that her visitor might be the young mistress of Wardour Court.

"The only lady in this neighbourhood, who, to my knowledge, drives piebalds, is Mrs. St. Priest; a very affected, whimsical personage. I wish you to be civil to her, Mildred, and nothing more," said Lord Alresford, as arm in arm they proceeded towards the house.

Mrs. St. Priest, notwithstanding the disparaging manner in which the earl spoke of her, occupied rather a prominent position among the notabilities of the neighbourhood. She was one of those aspiring people who will and do make their way above the heads of others with higher pretensions and more definite claims to distinction than themselves. Mrs. St. Priest's father was a gambler of the first water, and died leaving his daughter penniless: dependent on her wits to provide for her future support. This resource, however, served her so well, that she succeeded in captivating the affections of Major St. Priest, a man considerably her senior, and who survived their union only three years, leaving his widow in affluent circumstances, and moving in a much higher sphere than her birth entitled her to aspire to.

The ambition of Mrs. St. Priest, the well-jointed widow, then took a more developed form, and she speedily soared towards a second and much grander alliance. In the course of her ruminations on the important subject, it struck her that to accomplish this darling object—to raise her position in life—something more was needed than the actual possession of a certain modicum of pounds, shillings, and pence; for, among her numerous acquaintance, she numbered several ladies as well to do in the world as herself, who still remained only well-dowered widows: or who were going in due time to exchange their weeds, and enter into the holy state again with men of their own condition and degree. This conviction brought sore perplexity to Mrs. St. Priest's mind. To distinguish herself from the common herd, she could not set up for a literary lady; for, alas! her father's pursuits and resources flowed ever

in a channel totally opposite to the encouragement of learning and belles-lettres : neither could she lay claim to the distinction of beauty ; for the admission of mere prettiness was all she dare challenge from the world : but Mrs. St. Priest knew that her manners were soft and *carressantes*, that her deportment was perfectly lady-like and insinuating ; besides, her glass reflected the dazzling lily of her complexion, and the long wavy curls of bright auburn hair which floated on her shoulders. Now, *faute de mieux*, these were advantages not to be despised ; and, after much calculation, she arrived at the conclusion, that the character of an ultra-refined lady—a being fragile and delicate, tremblingly alive to the disagreeables of life, and vividly sensible to anything approaching the coarse and vulgar, would best veil her origin and her ambitious designs, and promote her schemes of aggrandisement. This point decided, Mrs. St. Priest next looked out for a suitable arena to enact her comedy ; and, after much careful investigation, she fixed on the county of D—shire, and took on lease a small mansion belonging to Lord Normanton ; not a little allured to this step, it must be frankly owned, by the significant fact that the four principal land-owners in the immediate neighbourhood were young and wealthy bachelors. Here Mrs. St. Priest duly installed herself, having first appropriately changed the name of her abode from “The Briars,” to the more euphonious one of Mon-Bijou. After driving about in her elegant phaeton and piebalds for some months, in every direction, Mrs. St. Priest at length was honoured by a morning call from her landlord’s mother, Lady Normanton. When this *bienveillance*, on the part of one of the leaders of the county *ton*, became bruited abroad, the widow soon saw her doors besieged by numbers of the minor potentates of fashion ; and from that day (about three years previous to the period of our history) she contrived so artfully to maintain her position, that no one was surprised to hear, on the return home of Lady Catherine Neville, that the elegant widow had paid her a visit, and was graciously received at Wardour Court.

Mrs. St. Priest had now reached the age of thirty-three ; and, notwithstanding the remarkable versatility of her genius for intrigue and affectation, was likely still to remain a widow. It was, therefore, with feelings of no small indignation she learned that her nearest neighbour, Lord Alresford, had presumed to offer elsewhere the possession of his hand and wealth : not that she had formed any decided design upon him, but it destroyed one of her chances.

To allude to one or two more of Mrs. St. Priest’s characteristics ; her voice was low, and remarkably sweet and plaintive, and all she said was uttered in a kind of deprecating *demi-mot* sort of style, which took irresistibly with some of her

hearers. Her attire was likewise carefully studied. Her cambric and lawn were like spiders' webs: nothing of so marvellous a texture had ever been seen by the laundresses of the neighbourhood, before the arrival of the refined mistress of Mon-Bijou. The skirts of her dresses were also of extraordinary amplitude, and swept the ground; and whenever she moved it was in the midst of a cloud of perfume: indeed, Mrs. St. Priest might have been traced for miles by the powerful odour of her patchouli and sandal-wood.

When Mildred entered the drawing-room, her visitor was standing at the window gazing on the clumps of rhododendrons in full bloom on the lawn. A little, white Italian greyhound, which she led about by a silver chain, shivered by her side, Mrs. St. Priest advanced, and went through the ceremony of introduction with more than her usual grace and suavity of manner; for, to tell the truth, she felt on uncertain ground, and would rather not have ventured, at any rate, upon so early a visit, without before testing its acceptableness: but Mrs. St. Priest, however, had a very especial reason for calling upon Mildred.

"It is so excessively kind of you to leave your delightful out-door occupation to talk to me!" said she, reassured by Lady Alresford's polite expressions of pleasure at receiving her; then seating herself, she threw aside half a dozen wraps, so as to reveal her delicate Mechlin collar, and the fashionable morning robe which fitted her compact little figure like wax: for Mrs. St. Priest had somehow imbibed the notion that it demonstrated a kind of aristocratic ease and nonchalance, to envelope herself, whenever she stirred abroad, in as many miscellaneous cloaks and shawls as would suffice a rheumatic old dowager at Christmas. "What a paradise you have here, Lady Alresford! A garden fit for the houris! But the earl has such exquisite taste," continued she.

"Are you fond of flowers?" asked Mildred, after waiting a moment to see whether Lord Alresford chose to respond to the compliment.

"Passionately! They are to me one of the chief charms of existence. I could pass hours among my flowers. I suppose your lordship is planning some addition to the gardens here, as I observed, *en passant*, sundry fresh cut beds?"

"No; we were, on the contrary, at work under Lady Alresford's superintendence when you passed," replied the earl.

"Unhappily, I have not strength, like Lady Catherine Neville, to take an active share in the management of my humble garden. If I stoop, or even stand about giving directions for an hour, I feel so wretchedly *abimée* I am fit for nothing else the entire day. I suppose, Lady Alresford, you have

already made acquaintance with Lady Catherine, the belle of our neighbourhood?"

"No, I have not yet seen her ladyship," replied Mildred, with rather a sturdy accent.

"Is it possible? How very intrusive then must my visit appear!" ejaculated Mrs. St. Priest, affectedly, casting her blue eyes up to the ceiling, and clasping her hands. "Lady Catherine, however, is so frequently indisposed: indeed, I often imagine Wardour must be too bleak a spot for one accustomed to the genial temperature of an Italian climate. She always appears to me depressed in spirits—abstracted; precisely like one struggling under the ascendancy of *la belle passion*: yet we all know this cannot be, for Lady Catherine has but to smile to see all the world at her feet," continued she, glancing sharply at Mildred, who had taken up her embroidery.

The earl laughed aloud. Both Lady Alresford's and the widow's eyes rested upon him at the same moment.

"If you mean to insinuate, Mrs. St. Priest, that Lady Catherine is too amiable and generous to withhold a certain degree of benevolent feeling towards everyone, good, bad, or indifferent, who falls in her way, and often reaps a poor return for her kindness and condescension, I certainly agree with you, in this sense, that she is a victim of what you call '*la belle passion*;' though, allow me to assure you that at this point your commiseration may cease, as no one honoured by her serious preference could possibly be insensible to the value of the boon conferred!"

"Undoubtedly! Lady Catherine is a most charming, delightful person, and is certain some day to make *une union de cœur et d'esprit*; but for all this, to my idea, there is a great depth of melancholy in her character—something so elevated and refined, so above the common level of minds, which I consider one of her chief attractions. That old Mrs. Otway must be terribly tiresome as a companion, with her garrulous gossip: don't you think so, my lord?" asked Mrs. St. Priest, with a silvery laugh.

"Mrs. Otway is a great friend of mine; and if you knew all her sterling worth, you would think her the very reverse of tiresome," replied Lord Alresford, quietly.

"Her knitting capabilities are worth something certainly, for the drawing-room at Wardour Court resembles the show-room of a *lingère*, with her vulgar cotton anti-macassars and covers!" said Mrs. St. Priest, with a sneer, applying the delicate cobweb in her hand to her nose, as she rose to inspect Mildred's labours.

Her movement roused the tiny greyhound from its slumbers.

"Hush, hush, Donna! Be quiet, my pet!" said Mrs. Priest,

caressingly, as the little animal started up and commenced a shrill bark, which set tinkling all the small silver bells around its collar. "Now make your obeisance to the countess, like a well-bred dog. Now, Donna, Donna, now!" continued she, jerking the small chain in her hand; and presently, in obedience to its mistress's commands, the well-trained little creature stood up on its hind legs, absurdly capered about, and twisted its poor head into all manner of contortions.

"*A present petit amour, couches toi et dors!*" continued she, laying her favourite on a rich satin footstool near. "By-the-bye, my lord, did you meet Lord Normanton, in the course of your rambles abroad?"

"No; I chiefly resided in Italy, and I believe Lady Normanton told me her son was travelling in Greece and Turkey."

"Yes; but that was long ago. I know Miss Conway received letters from her brother dated at Palermo; but there is something to me very mysterious in Lord Normanton's movements. What a pity it is when young men will expatriate themselves for so long, wasting their talents and energy in a foreign land. Poor Lady Normanton, with her delicate nerves, suffers more than I can express!"

"I have not the slightest recollection of having met Lord Normanton anywhere; but at the same time it is quite possible I may have done so, for, unless he had been introduced, or specially pointed out, I should not know him: as, although such near neighbours, we are still strangers."

"Indeed! Ah, my lord, it was very bad of you to set so pernicious an example, and prefer Italy for so many years to your native country! I think we, your neighbours, may triumph a little after your long neglect, knowing to what fair object we now solely owe your presence; and, while pointing to yonder exquisite little statuette of *Le Dieu de Paphos*, address you in Voltaire's apostrophe,—

'Qui que tu sois, voilà ton maître,
Il l'est, le fut, ou le doit être!'

Do you not think we may, Lady Alresford?" said Mrs. St. Priest, in her most dulcet tones, while her fingers wandered amidst a cluster of lockets and baubles hanging from a chain round her neck.

"Why, really Mrs. St. Priest, I dare not take upon myself to assert so much," replied Lady Alresford, with a smile; though a faint colour tinged her cheek, and her eyes involuntarily turned towards her husband.

Mrs. St. Priest glanced sharply from her to the earl; who, wearied by the widow's nonsense, at this moment rose from his chair and strolled towards the window.

"Do you know the Conways, Lady Alresford?" said she,

after a lengthened pause. Mildred briefly replying in the negative, she continued,—“Isabella Conway is considered a great beauty : she and I are very intimate. Poor girl ! *je fais tout mon possible* to restrain an unfortunate vivacity of temperament, perfectly stunning to anyone with sensitive nerves. Miss Conway, who you know is engaged to marry Colonel Sutherland, nephew of the late Major St. Priest, is also a pretty girl, though not so great a favourite of mine as her sister. It is absolutely shocking to see the amount of rude health she enjoys : her nerves seem of iron. Did you ever meet Colonel Sutherland, Lady Alresford ? I believe he has been recently stationed in the neighbourhood of Stanmore.”

“Yes ; I know Colonel Sutherland well. He was a frequent guest at the Priory,” replied Mildred, firmly ; though her graceful head sank lower over the embroidery-frame.

“Edward Sutherland is a most agreeable, volatile fellow ; though I fear a sad flirt,” said Mrs. St. Priest, riveting her azure eyes on the countess. “I hope both the Conways will do well, and prosper. It is rumoured, though I know not with what truth, that Isabella has set her heart on the possession of all Mr. Egremont Turville’s pretty things at Nethercote. Is that my carriage, my lord ?” exclaimed she, as her ear caught the sound of wheels on the gravelled court in front of the mansion.

“Lady Catherine Neville has just driven up ; but your ponies, Mrs. St. Priest, have been standing at the door for some time,” replied the earl nonchalantly.

“Indeed ! I must say *bon-jour* to Lady Catherine, and then fly away to fulfil an engagement at Moreton Place,” responded Mrs. St. Priest hastily, drawing her shawls over her shoulders.

As for Mildred, the bright colour glowed in her cheeks, and her fingers wandered rather nervously amongst the silks on the table by her side ; but no other signs of the inward emotion which now made her heart palpitate escaped her. Much need, indeed, did she stand of her hardly-acquired self-command, and of the restraining presence of a third party, to meet with equanimity the pleasure which lighted up Lord Alresford’s handsome features when the Lady Catherine was announced, and the frank heartiness of his welcome, as he led her to the spot where she stood. Silently, with a pang in her heart and a smile on her lip, poor Mildred gazed with envy on the pure placid brow of her visitor, who advanced eagerly towards her with a bright smile parting her beautiful lips, and her face glowing with pleasure and satisfaction.

“May I not greet you, dear Lady Alresford, as an old, a beloved friend ? Need we, indeed, go through the formality of an introduction ?” said Lady Catherine, pressing her lips to the countess’s forehead.

Mildred returned the salute ; but the *arrière pensée* lingered. She raised her eyes and saw the joyous smile yet rested on her husband's face which so seldom greeted her : and the chill crept again over her spirits.

Lady Catherine's face was shaded with a slight, though a very slight, tinge of disappointment, as she turned away ; when, apparently perceiving Mrs. St. Priest for the first time, she made a slight inclination to her before taking her seat. Mildred was struck by its cold haughtiness ; and, shall we confess it, her eye rested more complacently on the drooping figure of the widow, who now stood ready to make her adieux.

"I trust I shall have the honour of receiving your ladyship at Mon-Bijou, whenever you have nothing of more interest to occupy your time," said Mrs. St. Priest, with her most winning manner and air, as Mildred bade her farewell. "Lady Catherine, I wish you good-morning. Pray, present my compliments to Mrs. Otway."

Lady Catherine bowed ; and Mrs. St. Priest, escorted by Lord Alresford, quitted the room.

"I was amazed to find Mrs. St. Priest here. I had so set my heart on being your first visitor, Mildred. May I not call you Mildred ?" said Lady Catherine, seating herself on the couch close to Lady Alresford.

"Oh, yes : pray do," replied Mildred, with a smile ; yielding, in spite of herself, to Lady Catherine's warmth and fascination of manner.

"Well, remember you must do the same and call me Catherine. Now, tell me, Mildred, what you think of Mrs. St. Priest ?"

"She seems a good, kind little body ; harmless, and perhaps rather affected. Upon the whole, I think my impression is favourable," rejoined Mildred, carelessly.

"Really ! I suppose, then, I must be prejudiced," said Lady Catherine, hastily.

"Do you know anything against her ?"

"Oh, nothing : my complaint is made up of a variety of small delinquencies. Indeed, I should have some difficulty in reducing my charge into a tangible shape : yet I strongly advise you, dear Mildred, to content yourself with paying back her civil speeches by civil speeches, and nothing more," replied Lady Catherine, laughing.

In another moment or two Lord Alresford re-entered the room ; and nothing more was said about Mrs. St. Priest. Lady Alresford then resumed her walking attire, and the trio set off on a long stroll through the grounds. Lady Catherine seemed perfectly at home, and flitted like a bird from one spot to another, giving a loose rein to her admiration in words of glowing eloquence when pleased, or as unsparingly censuring

when actuated by the contrary feeling. Her demeanour towards Lady Alresford was so gentle and withal plainly, yet so delicately, evinced her desire to obtain her friendship and love, that, but for the fell suspicion which rankled in Mildred's mind, that her guest was the sole impediment which severed from her her husband's affection, she must have succumbed to the fascination of Lady Catherine's manner. As she watched the glow of interest which kindled her beautiful features while listening to Lord Alresford's animated conversation, Mildred was struck at times by the deep, sudden gloom that all at once flitted across her face. However, Lady Catherine soon rallied again from this momentary abstraction, and laughed and talked, until the evening shadows warned her it was time to think of retracing her route to Wardour Court.

"You will be sure to come and pay me a visit, Mildred, in a day or two. I cannot express Mrs. Otway's chagrin at not accompanying me hither to-day; but she was suddenly assailed with an old-fashioned notion, that it was not *bienséante* for so many to intrude just at present on your privacy," said the Lady Catherine, as she proceeded to her carriage.

Mildred stood at the window and watched her depart. She saw the carl gather up the reins and place them carefully in her hand. Suddenly he leant forwards and addressed her earnestly for a second or two. Lady Catherine, with a smile, then raised her dark, liquid eyes to the window where she stood, and hastily responded. This little friendly conference was not lost on Mildred, for her eyes were riveted on the group: she forgot the boudoir, and the many instances of her husband's attention and anxiety to forestall her wishes in all things; for her suspicions were now more than confirmed, and her heart was hardened.

CHAPTER XV.

LORD AND LADY ALRESFORD AT WARDOUR COURT.

DURING the next few days, Lady Alresford observed with keen, jealous vigilance every action, and weighed each word which fell from her husband's lips. She felt dissatisfied and ashamed at the little control she was enabled to exercise over herself; yet all her past distrust and suspicion which Helen Campbell had so vigorously combated, and which Lord Alresford's seclusion and entire apparent devotion to herself during the past few weeks lulled, now returned in full force. Unlike her former studious avoidance of Lady Catherine's name, she now concentrated her utmost ingenuity to make her perpetually the theme, direct or indirect, of her conversations with the earl: not that she boldly sought explanation of those passages of her history which bore upon her close intimacy with him; but, after provoking casual remarks, generally of a laudatory nature, she treasured them in her memory, and in her solitary hours, her perverse fancy embellished and connected these fragments by an embroidery of her own colouring; till at length she became thoroughly imbued with, and convinced of, the truth and reality of her imaginary fears. That whisper, that eloquent glance spoke volumes—and, although as yet she could almost number the minutes she had spent in the Lady Catherine's society, even in this short interval she had herself felt too keenly the fascinations of her person and manner, not to tremble at the sway these powerful attractions would exercise over any man who had once succumbed beneath them. Carefully, most carefully did Mildred conceal from her husband the doubts which rankled in her mind; but like the effect of some terrible slow poison on the body, they gradually produced a moral atrophy, and soon all her future hopes and joys faded under its withering influence.

As for Lord Alresford, he seemed perfectly unconscious of the conflict in her mind—as unconscious as it was her studied aim and desire he should be. Invariably kind and solicitous to please her in all things, she knew and felt he was deeply pained by her reserve. Once only since their marriage had he mentioned Colonel Sutherland's name, and then at a season most untoward; it was on the evening after Lady Catherine's visit, whilst poor Mildred's heart burned resentfully at her supposed influence. The earl suddenly asked some question relative to her encouragement of Colonel Sutherland's addresses. Thrown off her guard by the unexpectedness of the

query, she felt her cheek flush; and her reply was cold, confused and haughty. Lord Alresford looked surprised; but immediately dropped the subject. She turned quickly towards him, for her heart smote her, and testified it was her duty to remove the false impression her manner created: but again irresolution proved her evil genius; for the earl, after waiting some time in evident expectation that she would explain or modify her words, quitted the room; and when they met again her courage failed to broach the unpleasant topic.

It was now one of Mildred's most constant and ever-recurring regrets, that Wardour Court was situated at so easy a distance from Amesbury. She dreaded a frequent repetition of Lady Catherine's visits; for, imbued with her jealous misgivings, she felt the chance of winning her husband's affection would be increased tenfold, could she by any possibility remove him from the dangerous sphere of his ward's influence. How this was to be accomplished remained for many days the subject of her profound meditation. Lord Alresford on his marriage, resigned his diplomatic post abroad; and she had heard him express a decided intention of spending the next two years at home, as his long previous absence on the continent rendered a residence on his estates desirable. Had Mildred sought the right clue, how easily would her doubts and bewildering projects have been resolved! As it was, during the following fortnight her mind had less leisure to brood over her present and future designs; as most of the principal neighbouring families called at Amesbury, and amongst them came Lady Normanton.

Next to seeing the Lady Catherine, Mildred's curiosity and interest were most strongly excited by her anticipated introduction to Maude Conway's family. Yielding to her vivid imagination, she had endowed the latter with such a profusion of personal and intellectual graces, that a positive feeling of chagrin came across her as the door opened, and she heard the young lady who accompanied Lady Normanton, and who entered the room with a deportment so scornful and unwinding, announced as Miss Conway. Wide, indeed, must have been Colonel Sutherland's choice from that beauty he had so often pointedly expatiated to her upon—that soft, melting grace, combined with symmetry of feature, indispensable to his ideal of female loveliness,—if the regular, though harshly-chiselled features, the high colour and bright, glittering eyes of the face before her had had power to win his heart. When, however, Lady Normanton introduced her companion as her second daughter, Mildred returned Miss Isabella Conway's greeting and forcible indications of her own importance, with more suavity than she would otherwise have vouchsafed; so glad

was she to find her fears groundless; feeling that, had this been Colonel Sutherland's betrothed, to have supplanted her in his heart would have been a very questionable triumph; besides aiming a fatal blow at his discriminating powers, on which her own self-complacency had so long securely reposed.

Moreton Place, the mansion Lady Normanton inhabited, was situated about four miles from Amesbury; and here she had lived with her two daughters ever since her husband's death, which happened soon after his accession to the title. Fortunately, however, for her son, his education was rendered totally independent of her control by his father's will; though Lady Normanton resented this exclusion with the pertinacious littleness of a weak, passionate woman; and recklessly indifferent to her son's welfare, for years her greatest delight was to impede his guardian's designs by as many vexatious obstacles as she possibly could devise. By weak indulgence and injudicious flattery, she next strove to gain ascendancy over his mind; but even as a boy, Lord Normanton's high, manly spirit rebelled at the inequalities of his mother's temper. Her capricious tyranny and *exigeance* at times exasperated him; while her foolish compliance and inconsistency on other occasions weakened, and at length finally destroyed, his respect for her character and judgment. In his Sister Maude—his exact counterpart in feature and mind, as all their friends declared—Lord Normanton fortunately found a congenial friend and companion. Into her ear he poured all his boyish griefs and perplexities, and in their juvenile days it was beautiful to witness their attachment, and the touching devotion of her manner, as she turned her bright blue eyes, beaming with love and pride, upon him. As time stole on, however, another was admitted into this friendly league, and the Lady Catherine Neville became the almost inseparable companion of the brother and sister. The secluded life she had led from infancy, and the solitude and silence of Wardour, had subdued much of her youthful spirit; and at this period Lady Catherine, though a child in years, had acquired, by early habits of self-commune, a knowledge and power of reasoning wonderful for her age. As Lord Normanton gazed in her dark, flashing eyes, and heard the earnest energy with which she poured forth, and embodied in language almost poetical, some of the strange musings and aspirations of her lonely hours, his boyish fancy was fired, and he longed to share her pursuits and guide her enthusiastic spirit in its researches. Her passionate love for the good and beautiful, and the deep romance which imbued her mind, accorded with his own. Happy in each other's society, for some time, at stated periods of the year, they enjoyed their long, solitary rambles amid the deep woods and

sunny dells of Wardour ; until the increasing infirmities of Lord Willingham rendered change of climate indispensable, and Lady Catherine accompanied her father to Italy.

Soon after this event, Lord Normanton quitted Harrow, and after reading for a couple of years with a private tutor, went to college, where he passed a most brilliant career ; though, in the midst of all his honours, the vision of the enthusiastic child who first kindled and roused his ambition was indelibly impressed on his mind. There was one fault, however, deeply rooted in Lord Normanton's character, which her pure influence had failed to exercise : and this was a distrust of the motives of those amongst whom he lived. From his very earliest childhood, a caress from his mother had been a bribe to lure him to some compliance with her wishes, which otherwise she had not strength of character to enforce ; in latter years the same artifice—rendered more effectual, as she imagined, by a little flattery—was synonymous with something she desired to obtain, or some promise she wished to extort. As he entered more into the world, his strong sense of justice revolted, when, from his rank and riches alone, he found himself the object of obsequious attention ; while others, his equals in everything else save these worldly advantages, were cast comparatively into the background ; in short, his vanity was piqued to achieve some more legitimate triumphs, and an ardent longing arose to be indebted to himself, and not to his name, for the consideration he enjoyed.

As soon as he attained his majority, Lord Normanton, to free himself at once from his mother's underhand methods of intimating her wishes, doubled her jointure. He had also another opportunity for early signalling his generosity. His cousin, Robert Conway, a wild, worthless young man, had by a life of reckless dissipation, reduced himself to the last straits, and was threatened with expulsion from college. After having half ruined his father, a man of very moderate fortune, Mr. Conway, without a *sou* in his pocket, or the semblance of an excuse on his lips, threw himself upon his cousin's generosity as a *dernier ressort*. Lord Normanton paid his debts. A few months after the latter left college, Mr. Conway again involved himself in gambling debts to an immense amount ; but this time the finale was more tragic. Totally devoid of principle, and goaded by the desperation of his circumstances, he committed some extensive forgeries on an eminent banking firm. The fraud was promptly detected, and his arrest became inevitable. Again in a letter of agonising entreaty, he implored his cousin's aid and intercession. Lord Normanton instantly repaired to London, but after several interviews with his unhappy relative, and one with the principals of the banking-house, finding his good offices of no avail, he abruptly quitted

England before the trial, for a long-projected tour on the continent, without previously returning to Moreton : much to his mother's anger and dissatisfaction, who protested she never could divine the motive of this extraordinary whim.

A few days after Lady Normanton's call, Mildred and her husband drove to Wardour Court. Much to her surprise, Lord Alresford expressed no impatience for her speedy discharge of this act of courtesy towards Lady Catherine, and it was she who proposed the visit. A strange, restless anxiety possessed her spirit to watch once more their demeanour in each other's society ; and, fertile in the art of self-tormenting, she imagined this indifference on the part of Lord Alresford bespoke a security in Lady Catherine's regard which no apparent omissions of courtesy or interest could shake. Narrowly did Mildred watch the expression of his face, as she made the proposal to drive to Wardour ; but not even a passing emotion of any kind flitted across it, as the words fell from her lips.

The route from Amesbury to Wardour Court lay through a most lovely country, and as she sat by his side (for Lord Alresford drove her thither in his phaeton), insensibly the seriousness faded from her brow, and, forgetting for the moment her fancied wrongs, she abandoned herself to that sprightly vivacity of tone and manner always so captivating when united to a cultivated, well-stored mind. The beautiful scenery also kindled her enthusiasm ; for as yet, with the exception of one visit to Avington, and an occasional walk through the little village of Amesbury, her drives and promenades had been circumscribed to the limits of the park. The foliage, though fully expanded, still retained that vivid green and freshness, as yet unsullied by dust or shrivelled by the ardent sun, which renders the month of June so lovely. Now their route lay over the brow of some bold hill, sloping precipitously to the wooded valley on their right, through which the beautiful river D—— threaded, glistening in the sun like a broad silver band : while the towering peaks of the rocky hills abruptly arising from its margin, bounded the horizon, softened and mellowed in a cloud of purple and golden vapour. At other times the road descended abruptly into a narrow gorge, hemmed in by rough, jutting rocks ; the tall summits of many of which were crowned with dark pine plantations, contrasting with the bright verdure of the vegetation which wreathed the hill sides, and clustered around the margin of the deep hollows. Below, thickets of gorse and broom, interspersed by rocky ledges, covered with wild thyme and feathery-looking mosses, were scattered over the broad band of greensward which skirted the carriage road on either side. Mildred cast a look of regret on the wild luxuriance she was leaving behind, as the carriage passed the lodge gates of

Wardour, and proceeded rapidly up the stately trim avenue leading to the mansion.

Nothing could exceed the warmth and cordiality of Lady Catherine's greeting, and still more than ever was Mildred struck with the winning grace of her manner, and the intellectual beauty of her face. She was dressed in deep mourning, unrelieved save by the snowy whiteness of her collar and cuffs: and her hair was smoothly braided on her temples, and twisted into a heavy knot behind. Her friend, Mrs. Otway, sat by her on the sofa, knitting; and there was something so primitive and sweet in the expression of the old lady's countenance, that Mildred found her eyes irresistibly attracted towards her. Her features were pale and thin, and her nose rather long and aquiline; but in the expression of the faded, though regularly cut features, there was that unmistakable air of high breeding which seldom fails to command interest, and a simple benevolence in her smile that at once won the heart. Her forehead was high and slightly furrowed, and small flat curls, lightly sprinkled with powder, clustered round her face. She wore a close cap of the whitest, finest lace; and a full frill, or ruff, of the same delicate Mechlin, encircled her neck, displaying its elaborate pattern to the greatest advantage over her black silk dress. A gold chate-laine of exquisite workmanship hung from her waist, with its multitude of fanciful appendages, and attached on the other side was an old fashioned contrivance—a kind of steel rest for the knitting-pin when the hand wearied of grasping the mass of work depending from it: an alleviation Mrs. Otway's notable industry amply deserved.

After some conversation, Lady Catherine, with the most obliging desire to entertain her guest, led Mildred through the flower garden, and displayed her pictures, and a collection of vases and other articles made during her sojourn abroad. On a stand near one of the windows of the largest room, in which the pictures hung, was a large portfolio filled with various sketches and drawings; and while Lady Catherine was discussing the merits of a painting with Lord Alresford with more *élan* and interest than Mildred approved, the latter, with her old feelings of resentment kindled again, strolled towards it, and listlessly commenced turning over its contents, though her eyes were riveted upon her companions. Many allusions to things and personages abroad intermingled in their discussion, and Lord Alresford talked with a lively ease and interest in the subject, which tended not a little to increase her irritable sensations.

Presently Mrs. Otway approached, and, in her simple language, began to descant on some of the scenes Lady Catherine had so ably illustrated; and though Mildred was

compelled to lend an outward attention, she still keenly observed the earl's deportment. After a time, Lady Catherine retreated into the recess of one of the windows on a level with that against which she stood, and for the next ten minutes conversed with the earl in more subdued accents; and then Lady Alresford distinctly heard the rustle of paper, as of the folding or unfolding of a letter. She fancied also that the beautiful bloom was deepened on Lady Catherine's cheek, when she joined her again; and, acting with her usual quick impulse, Mildred turned hastily away to address Mrs. Otway, who held a drawing, which she was just about to display. With a low, hurried exclamation of surprise, however, Lady Catherine hastily snatched it from the old lady's hand, and buried it beneath a pile of drawings already exhibited, while a deep blush suffused her cheeks and brow, as she timidly glanced towards Lord Alresford. Mrs. Otway, however, retained the drawing long enough for Mildred to perceive, through the transparent paper which covered it, that it was a portrait—the portrait moreover, of a gentleman; and she was awaiting its full display with no little interest and anxiety. The evident confusion and sudden silence of Lady Catherine, who for many minutes after did not recover her vivacity, convinced Mildred she was more than justified in harbouring her most cruel and mortifying suspicion; and soon after, with a manner constrained and formal, she took her leave, little edified or reassured by her visit to Wardour Court.

If Mildred before thought absence from the range of Lady Catherine's attractions desirable, now, as may be supposed, most doubly imperative and necessary did it appear to her. But the difficulty was, how could she, a bride of a month, deliberately propose a change of residence; with its consequent admission that she was weary of her *tête-à-tête* with her husband—wearily of the beautiful home he had taken such pains to adorn for her reception? Besides, where could she ask him to take her? Chance, however, favoured her design, and very speedily afforded her the opportunity she panted for. She happened the following morning to descend a few minutes earlier than usual. On a small side table, in the breakfast-room, lay the letters just arrived from Avington, including not only her own, but Lord Alresford's correspondence. As her eye ran over the addresses of the letters, she descried one directed to her husband, with the premier's autograph in its lefthand corner. In a moment the idea flashed through her mind that this letter might aid her design; for could the earl be prevailed upon to accept or solicit aught from government, which would require his immediate presence in London, her desire would be effectually and skilfully accomplished; and she at once determined that no insinuations or effort on her

part, to bring about this much wished for result, should be wanting.

She stood at the window musing how to commence operations, when Lord Alresford entered the room. After talking to her for a few minutes, he turned to the table, and taking up the identical letter she wished him to do, broke the seal. Impatiently, she awaited for some indication of its contents, and her beautiful eyes rested upon him with that interest her anxiety now prompted, but which pride on other occasions so frequently repelled.

"This letter is from Lord Woodburn, requesting my presence in the House on Wednesday night to support his bill," said Lord Alresford, surprised at the sudden interest she evinced in his correspondence, and wondering, perhaps, what motive could have kindled it.

"You intend, of course, to comply with his lordship's request?" replied she, promptly, and inquiringly, while the colour suffused her cheeks.

"No; it will not be convenient to me to go to town next week. Besides, Mildred, I would not leave you; especially as this bill is not very important, and is sure to pass," replied the earl, decisively.

Mildred was silent for some minutes: she fixed her eyes steadily on the ground. Lord Alresford continued opening his letters.

"Do not refuse Lord Woodburn's request only on my account, for I should like exceedingly to accompany you to town. The season is very brilliant still, and I miss my usual sojourn there at this period more than I can express," said she, at length rapidly; though her eyes were still bent on the carpet.

"I am sorry for it, Mildred. I have made arrangements to spend the remainder of the year here, and I do not feel disposed to alter my determination," replied Lord Alresford, coldly, continuing to peruse the letter in his hand.

Her colour came and went quick and fast. She the idolised,—the indulged one, to be refused in this unequivocal cavalier style! yet in her resentment she cast not a thought on the bitter indifference her own words implied. Urged by her intense anxiety to win his love,—only to be obtained, as she imagined, far from all comparison with the beautiful, the dreaded Lady Catherine—she resolved to hazard another trial of her power.

"Lord Alresford, I desire very much to visit London. Will you deny my first request?" said she, haughtily, though with difficulty retaining her self-possession.

Lord Alresford laid down his letter. She was spell-bound, under that strange fascination and species of awe he always exercised over her spirit.

"Mildred," said he, firmly, "I will not yield to your caprice. You shall have time for reflection: nor will I expose you, in your present frame of mind, to the temptations which the gratification of your wish would entail. Before, your safeguards against every dangerous allurement were the love and confidence you reposed in your parents; *now*,—but I will leave you to draw the parallel: only one day you may, perhaps, thank me for my peremptory denial of your request."

"Then your refusal proceeds alone from generous concern for my welfare, and you have no personal reasons for desiring to remain at Amesbury, as you stated before?" retorted Mildred, with a sarcastic bitterness she could not repress, while her beautiful face crimsoned.

"Lady Alresford, I should imagine, would have been the last to need explanation of the personal motives likely to induce me to consider Amesbury our most desirable residence at present," rejoined the earl, calmly quitting the room.

But Mildred, in the depth of her pique and resentment, attributed her husband's firm resolution alone to the strength of his *liaison* with the Lady Catherine.

In a few minutes Lord Alresford returned, with no vestige of their past debate visible in his face and manner. During the following half-hour he conversed as if nothing had occurred to ruffle their good understanding; though she fancied he lingered longer by her side than it was his wont to do. Mildred, however, made no advance, though involuntarily she sighed as the door at length closed for the morning upon her husband, and she was left again to her lonely cogitations.

CHAPTER XVI.

A PEEP AT THE CONWAYS.

LET us now take a peep at others of our *dramatis persone* over their breakfast-table. We confess a predilection for this early meal, especially in summer, when Nature also puts on her most tempting aspect, and all things without look fresh and luxuriant. A fair face and kindly disposition then beam upon us with redoubled lustre, when the mind, refreshed by sleep, diffuses a calm serenity over every speaking feature; while we have observed, on the contrary, that those faces habitually puckered with peevish fretfulness assume at the morning meal additional repulsiveness; as if the repose ordained to renovate the faculties of both body and mind, served in such unlucky individuals but to quicken the venom which debars them the enjoyment of much that is pleasant and delightful in this beautiful world of ours.

At the breakfast table, then, in a small comfortably, rather than richly furnished apartment, at Moreton Place, was a young lady answering in every intent and purpose our first sketch. Before her stood the hissing tea-urn; and when we first observe her, her head is slightly inclined, watching the descent of the boiling stream on the fragrant leaves in the tea-pot; but presently she raises her eyes and looks rather anxiously at the door, as she hears footsteps in the hall without. Her face is not regularly handsome, but still on the noble brow, relieved by shining bands of silky hair, in the varying shadows trembling in her deep blue eyes, in the smile which slightly elevates the corners of her small, well cut mouth, there was something infinitely captivating. *L'expression fait tout*—we are repeatedly told, and Miss Conway, as she stood there with her dazzling complexion, pure as her white morning robe, with good humour dimpling her soft cheek, was a living exemplification of its truth. Near her, in an arm-chair, sat her mother. Lady Normanton's figure was *petite* and gracefully formed, though ill health, rather than age, had robbed it of its fulness. Her face still retained vestiges of great former beauty, though now the once blooming cheek was hollow and wan, and a fretful frown of discontent furrowed the brow and curled the lip. She reclined back in her chair enveloped in a large shawl, although summer still spread its most tempting sky, and her eyes followed with restless peevishness the graceful movements of her daughter.

"I really wish, Maude, you would attend to my request,

and desire Harris to bake the rolls more. I may just as well speak to my poodle as ask you to do anything; yet you know Dr. Batswing said dough in this crude state was highly indigestible, and likely to bring on another attack of dyspepsia," said Lady Normanton, fretfully tossing the uppermost crust from a plate of hot, buttered rolls before her.

"I did lecture her for above half an hour yesterday, dear mamma, I assure you; and she promised to attend better this morning. Look, I really believe, if you try this bit you will find it well baked," replied Maude, good-naturedly, turning over the roll to find a piece to suit her mother's fastidious palate.

"Well, just put it down on the plate, Maude. You cannot expect me to taste it while you hold it there balanced like Mahomet's coffin!"

Miss Conway obeyed. After slowly separating a minute particle from the piece, Lady Normanton suddenly laid down her knife and fork.

"Maude, don't you see the glare of the sun is enough to sicken one? Do put down the Venetian shade! Really, what can your head always be running upon, that you never observe anything?"

"Do you feel more comfortable now, mamma?" asked Miss Conway, placing before her mother a cup of tea, after shutting out the bright sunshine from the room.

"Yes: this subdued light is infinitely more grateful," said Lady Normanton, in no very gracious tones, sipping the tea. "Good Heavens, Maude! you must have emptied the sugar-basin into my cup. How very careless! really, I can never get my daughters to perform the slightest service for me properly."

"Fortunately, here is another cup just ready; perhaps you will like it better," replied Maude, in tones unmoved, quietly substituting one cup for the other before her querulous ladyship could interpose.

"Now ring the bell, Maude, and inquire whether Harris has got a gallina's egg for my breakfast. Dr. Batswing said they contained twice as much nourishment as any other. I must speak to Jones, the bailiff; for I have more than a dozen gallinas, and never get an egg. It is perfectly abominable; and I dare say it will be the same tale again this morning."

The bell was rung; and, after due inquiry, as it was found the twelve Guinea fowls, with strange perversity, refused to produce an egg between them for her ladyship's *dejeuner*, Lady Normanton resumed her repast in no very amiable mood; and Maude, after plying her mother's plate with a variety of delicacies, arranging her cushions, and feeding her

poodle, at length sat down, and ventured to commence her own breakfast.

Lady Normanton continued to eat in silence for some minutes.

"I wonder when your sister will please to make her appearance. When I was young such indolence was not tolerated. Did you go into her room the last thing before you came down stairs, Maude?"

"Yes, mamma. I dare say Isabella is wearied with her fatiguing expedition yesterday, and will be down presently," said Maude, in her most conciliating tones.

"Her fatigues! Do you mean her drive yesterday to Nethercote with your aunt elect—little, silly Mrs. St. Priest?"

Maude's cheek flushed; even her gentle spirit felt chafed at her mother's wanton irritability. At this moment, however, Lady Normanton's thoughts received a fresh diversion by the abrupt entrance of her daughter. The young lady advanced into the room with a very decided manner and air; her regular features breathing defiance at anyone presuming to call her in question as to the hour it was her sovereign pleasure to partake of her morning meal. Lady Normanton instantly opened a volley of small shot; which, however, Miss Isabella chose to treat with most supreme indifference; and after nonchalantly glancing at the breakfast-table, she coolly walked to the bell, rang it, and then stood smoothing her *bandeaux* before the mirror over the chimney-piece.

"What did you ring the bell for, Isabella?" asked Lady Normanton, in no very gentle tones, as Hughes the butler answered the peremptory summons.

"Take the urn out and refill it with boiling water, and bring some more eggs, muffin, and hot roll!" said the impracticable Isabella, without vouchsafing a glance at her irate mother. "I think you might have kept a little hot tea for me, at any rate, Maude: but I know people in love are the most forgetful creatures in the world. Good Heavens! pray pull up that blind—the room looks like some dismal den!" exclaimed she, composedly seating herself.

"I dare say you think this nonchalant deportment vastly becoming to you, Miss Isabella Conway; but let me inform you, once for all, that if you cannot rise in time to breakfast with your sister and myself, you will please to content yourself with what you find on the table; for I will not have Harris disturbed whilst she is drawing up the *carte* for dinner," rejoined Lady Normanton, fretfully.

"I am exceedingly sorry to disturb Harris's cogitations on soups and *ragoûts*. I assure your ladyship, I will do all in my power to spare her precious time," retorted Isabella, scornfully. "Well, Maude, what is the matter? You look as

grave and sorrowful as you did before Edward Sutherland's last visit."

Miss Conway made no reply, and, to conceal the bright drops which sprang to her eyes at this unfeeling taunt, bent her small head still lower over her needle; for on her sister's appearance she had retreated from the breakfast-table, and left her to the undisturbed enjoyment of the morning's bickering.

"I wonder when Normanton will think it worth while to trouble his head about us? How long is it since we heard from him, Isabella?" at length said Lady Normanton, after a long pause in the dialogue; during which Isabella ate, and her mother fondled her poodle, yawned, and had frequent recourse to the bottle of pungent salts by her side.

"You had better ask Maude. Normanton thinks her the only person worth writing to amongst us," replied Isabella, carelessly tossing the wing of a chicken to the dog; who, thereupon, immediately leaped from Lady Normanton's lap, with a sudden eagerness which caused her to start violently.

"When did you hear last from your brother, Maude?" demanded Lady Normanton, colouring, and darting a furious glance at her second daughter.

"I think it was about three weeks ago, mamma. Normanton was then on the point of leaving Naples for Florence."

"I wish he would be on the point of leaving anywhere for England. A young man of his fortune and consequence ought to be thinking of settling in life, and taking a political station, instead of wandering indolently on the continent. That Robert Conway had some hand in driving him abroad: though I never could penetrate the mystery; for Normanton's stupid closeness of disposition is perfectly odious. There must be some attraction abroad; and I quite expect he will bring home some ballet girl, or street beggar, as his wife."

"Oh, mamma!" exclaimed Miss Conway, involuntarily lifting her soft eyes from her work.

"Nothing more likely, I should say; just to demonstrate his sublime indifference to those two things the world generally reckons in its catalogue of objects to be desired—wealth and position. You know Normanton was always *entiché* with the absurd notion that every girl he saw wished to marry him for his money and rank," rejoined Isabella.

"Here is my son throwing away all his advantages, and my daughters, though they have been out these four years, remain unmarried; and are likely, for ought I know, to continue so. Even if they do manage to attract lovers, they seem woefully ignorant of the art of retaining them," grumbled Lady Normanton, casting a reproachful glance at Maude.

"Pray, mamma, will you be good enough to inform us what

advantages Normanton throws away ; for it appears to me he ca really treasure them all !” said Isabella, sneeringly.

“ I mean, by his preposterous absurdity and romantic nonsense about being married, for himself he is throwing away the chance of a match with his old friend and playfellow, Lady Catherine Neville : she would make a most suitable wife for him. But all my children are resolved to fly in my face, I plainly perceive. However, we shall see. Mr. Egremont Turville is not such a fastidious simpleton as Normanton, and knows how to make court to the heiress. I told your brother the county was ringing with the news of Mr. Turville’s assiduities in that quarter, last week when I wrote to him, so perhaps we may see him sooner than we anticipate.”

“ Then, mamma, all I say is, you added another link to a chain of scandalous gossip already long enough. I have closely watched Mr. Turville and Lady Catherine, and I feel assured there is nothing between them save cousinly regard.”

“ Just the very thing to build upon, Isabella ; in spite of your vehement assertions. Throw a fascinating man and a handsome young woman together constantly, without let or hindrance, with all restraints and *égards* dissipated by cousinly affinity, and a match is sure to be the result ; so you need not hope, my dear, to make a conquest of the lord of Nethercote !” said Lady Normanton, carelessly twisting round the rings on her thin fingers.

“ Your ladyship need be under no alarm. Mr. Egremont Turville, with twice his wealth, would scarce make me forget who I am !” rejoined Miss Isabella Conway, haughtily ; and her small mouth curled with angry disdain.

“ I should trust so, indeed, Isabella. Maude, you who half live at Wardour Court, what do you say to Mr. Turville’s chances with the heiress ?”

“ Indeed, mamma, I have had few opportunities of judging,” replied she, quietly : for, one among Isabella’s amiable qualities was this—that after bantering poor Maude until she extracted something like an opinion or admission, the next time she saw Lady Catherine she would triumphantly descant upon the fact so elicited, on her sister’s authority.

“ Oh, Maude only knows what she likes to tell. It is no use to ask her anything,” exclaimed Isabella, bitterly.

“ The best thing you could do, Maude, would be to use your influence with your friend to induce her to suspend her choice until after your brother’s return home. He would surely not suspect his old playfellow of wishing to entrap him !”

“ On my life, he would ! Normanton’s absurd susceptibility would lead him into any folly.”

“ Upon my word, your brother is obliged to you, Miss Isabella. Now, if my son would but be reasonable, and return

home and marry Lady Catherine, I need never leave this place for that odious old kennel of a house at Bowmore. Give me that footstool, Maude, and just raise the pillow behind me. Those flowers make me quite ill ; do, pray, put them outside in the hall," said Lady Normanton, pointing to a vase filled with jasmine and honeysuckle on a side table. "Ah, girls!" continued she, with a sigh, "had your father lived, your present destiny would have been very different. Not but what Normanton has behaved uncommonly well in doubling my paltry jointure of two thousand a year, on the day he came of age ; but my lot has been peculiarly unlucky, and I have had little enjoyment of the consequence and wealth which a marriage with your father at first seemed to promise——"

"Then, mamma, you should not blame us : for, if you have had disadvantages to contend with, so have we. Maude and I have never even tasted the privileges of our station."

Lady Normanton continued, without heeding her daughter's interruption :—

"Before your father came to the title, I had the discomfort and plague of bringing you three into the world, and thereby ruined my health for ever. Dr. Batswing says, my nervous system will never recover its elasticity. Your father only survived his accession to the family honours one year ; and words are powerless to describe what I then went through with the vile tribe of lawyers, trustees, and guardians. Witham was let ; arrangements were made for my son's education, *malgré* everything I could say—and now, after all I have suffered, Normanton nearly ruins himself with paying other people's debts, and takes himself off in this cavalier style, instead of living at home and reinstating his mother and sisters in the family mansion. He really seems to care for none of us but Maude."

"As far as I am concerned, I should beg to decline joining the family circle at Witham. Normanton is far too dictatorial for me," said Isabella, sarcastically.

"Really, Isabella, your flights and airs are perfectly ludicrous : and could your brother hear you, he certainly would not consider himself a loser by your absence. Maude, ring the bell for my drops. Johnson's head must be like a sieve ; she knows I always take them immediately after breakfast." When Lady Normanton had swallowed the mixture, immediately presented by her maid, she continued, "By-the-bye, Maude, I understand you were at Wardour when Lord and Lady Alresford paid their second visit there. Now, I only heard this by a side-wind. I never in my life met with so close and disingenuous a character as yours !"

"I did not think you particularly cared for an enumeration of Lady Catherine's visitors, mamma, especially in this case ;

as, judging from your manner, I thought Lady Alresford did not produce a favourable impression on either you or Isabella, when you called at Amesbury."

"I cannot tell how you venture to set yourself up as a competent judge of my manners or sentiments either; you must have a monstrous opinion of your discriminating faculties! However, in this one instance you are right; for I certainly never felt more disappointed in anybody in my life than with Lady Alresford. I thought her frigid and *insouciant* to a degree positively repulsive. Lord Alresford also thinks no small things of himself! But I want to know, Maude, how *you* liked her?" asked Lady Normanton, peevishly.

"If you insist upon my opinion, mamma, I hope you will not be offended if I speak it truly. I was very much fascinated by Lady Alresford's manners and appearance. I think I never saw a more beautiful face. There was something so kind and gentle in the tone of her voice, too. When you meet her again I feel sure you will admire her," replied Maude.

"*Apropos*, Maude—I think I did not tell you Mrs. St. Priest intimated yesterday, during our drive, that this immaculate Lady Alresford is an old flame of Edward Sutherland's. By what I can understand from her, there seems to have been a regular flirtation between them when he was stationed at Stanmore. Pray, did this fact form any portion of his mysterious disclosures, when he was closeted with you for full two hours during his last visit?"

Miss Conway made no reply; her heart was too full for words; a slight tremulous motion of the lip alone testified that she heard the abrupt interrogatory.

"Well, Maude," continued Isabella, "you need not look so angry and aggrieved; forewarned is forearmed, you know—and were I you, when Edward Sutherland comes into this neighbourhood again, I would not let him go near Amesbury."

"Did Mrs. St. Priest say, he was likely soon to visit her again?" asked Lady Normanton.

"Yes; she said she expected him in a week or ten days," replied Isabella, pausing, as Hughes presented himself at the door.

"Mrs. St. Priest, my lady, has sent over a messenger to know whether Miss Conway or Miss Isabella will like to drive with her to Nethercote this afternoon."

"Give our compliments, and say, that either Miss Conway or myself will be with Mrs. St. Priest by two o'clock," replied Isabella, promptly.

"Good Heavens! what can Mrs. St. Priest be going over to Nethercote again for?" ejaculated Lady Normanton, lifting up her eyes.

"To see Mr. Egremont Turville, most probably, mamma,"

observed Isabella, flippantly. "I suppose, Maude, as you are an affianced young lady, you won't mind my sharing this privilege with her?"

"Not in the least, Isabella, as far as the drive and Mr. Egremont Turville are concerned; but, unfortunately, I promised Lady Catherine to walk over to Wardour after lunch," replied Miss Conway, hesitatingly: for she perceived the incipient pout on her sister's rosy lip.

"Well, Maude, for once you must let your friend's convenience yield to your mother's. It is quite impossible that both my daughters can go out and leave me alone; so if you cannot live a day without visiting Wardour Court, you must take your maid and walk there after dinner. Now, if you please, we will go into my sitting-room; and, perhaps, you will write those letters for me I spoke to you about yesterday evening."

Miss Conway arose, and quietly put aside her work to obey her mother's *exigant* caprice. Poor girl! involuntarily a heavy sigh fluttered on her lip.

"I wish you joy of your task, Maude," said Isabella, maliciously, as her sister passed the couch, on which she was preparing to recline with the last new novel in her hand. "I shall be back again about four. Adieu!"

CHAPTER XVII.

MRS. OTWAY'S RUMINATIONS.

MISS ISABELLA CONWAY returned home from her drive in a humour anything but improved by her *tête-à-tête* with the languishing widow; and, after a dinner prolonged to a most insupportable length by the captious caprice of Lady Norman-ton, Maude was permitted to set off on her long-delayed expedition to Wardour Court.

A feeling of indescribable relief stole over her as she closed the small gate admitting from the grounds of Moreton Place into the meadows, across which a footpath led direct to Lady Catherine's abode. She strolled slowly along; the quiet—the delicious luxury of being allowed space and leisure to think, when her heart was throbbing with anxiety and dire foreboding—the absence of the taunting word which sometimes drove her harassed spirit to the verge of desperate defiance of her domestic tyrants, fell so soothingly on her mind, that, insensibly, her fair young brow unbent, and the quick anxious glance of her clear, blue eye melted—shall we say it—into a tear; for Maude's lonely meditations were of past betrayals,

of future deep and bitter suffering. Her first dream of love had been given to Colonel Sutherland—given with the fresh, full ardour of her truthful spirit: for she fancied his deeds blameless as his words, and believed that the man who spoke and reasoned as did her beloved brother, would alike act from the same principles, and make them the foundation and test of his daily conduct. Bitterly was she undeceived; and to all the petty tyranny of her home, was now added the galling, humbling sense of being deserted—betrayed; of having tendered the most precious gift in woman's power to bestow, to meet with contempt and ingratitude in return.

Originally, Colonel Sutherland's hand and ample fortune were destined by Lady Normanton for her daughter Isabella: who, having met him at Mrs. St. Priest's, became violently smitten with his easy volubility and flow of spirits; for Colonel Sutherland, though possessed of deep, unscrupulous passions, when fully aroused, was one of those individuals, who, without one solid attainment, and with very shallow intellect, adroitly manage to collect a particle from every source; so that whether the conversation soared to the flights of metaphysics, or descended to the most exquisite nonsense that ever escaped male or female lips, he generally contrived to acquit himself of his share with apparent ease; and, certainly, always with *éclat*. Such was the origin of Colonel Sutherland's introduction to Moreton, an intimacy most unlucky for poor Maude; for divining the drift of Lady Normanton's polite *empressment*, and speedily perceiving that Miss Isabella's fierce, imperious spirit was impervious to harmless flirtation, he turned his attention to her sister.

Struck by Maude's gentle, womanly manners, Colonel Sutherland soon exchanged his gallant speeches for the language of what he then supposed sincere passion; nor was he undeceived as to the hollowness of his professions, until he met the beautiful, and brilliant Miss Effingham. Then were poor Maude's wrongs avenged; for Mildred, with her radiant spirit and ready wit, was just the woman to enthral and hold captive the heated fancy of such a man as Colonel Sutherland. He loved her deeply, unutterably; and then only to find her the affianced bride of another,—lost to him by her own consent and deed. When the illusion of making Mildred his own was dissipated by her approaching marriage with Lord Alresford, Miss Conway listened to Colonel Sutherland's confessions of past faithlessness with feelings of sorrow indescribable; she felt smitten to the heart. Even his voluntary humiliation she knew to be a tacit acknowledgment of her rival's power. Her trust in him was for ever gone: and though she pardoned him, the galling remembrance of his desertion she felt could never be effaced: and more in compliance with his urgent entreaties

than aught else—for he knew too well his power over her gentle, yielding nature—she reluctantly consented to remain his betrothed.

Slowly, then, Maude walked along the path, which wound now under green hedges and by mossy banks spangled with wild pink geranium and delicate star-wort; then taking a more decided sweep across the meadow, diverged at length into a narrow bridle way. This, by a gentle ascent, led to the summit of the ridge of hills which divided the estates of Lord Normanton from those of the Lady Catherine. From this slight elevation, a fine view might be obtained of the beautiful wooded valley, in the centre of which stood the mansion of Wardour. Groups of noble oaks and sycamores, some of gigantic size, surrounded it on all sides; and through the middle of the valley a narrow streamlet flowed, now flashing in the rays of the setting sun, like burnished silver, now coquettishly disappearing behind the stately clumps of timber.

The mansion of Wardour Court was a venerable looking pile, and dated from the reign of Elizabeth. It was a low, compact edifice, of considerable dimensions, built of brick, with facings and quoins of white stone. Around the roof ran a low parapet of carved stone, and in the centre arose a tall clock-tower. The principal entrance was by a porch of massive oak elaborately carved, and otherwise ornamented with grotesque figures and devices. Over this, the hatchment affixed on the decease of Lord Willingham still remained. In front of the mansion was a court of greensward, separated from the park by a sunk fence and balustrade, decorated with balls, stone rosettes, and huge lotus-shaped vases, in which pink hydrangeas flourished luxuriantly. Behind the mansion, and parallel on either side with the court, were long avenue of firs and cedars, imparting a dark, gloomy aspect to the *tout ensemble*.

Lady Catherine had done her best to lessen the sombreness of her ancient abode, by training a variety of bright looking creepers to contrast their showy blossoms with its dark, weather-stained walls. At various seasons of the year, brilliant clusters of roses, japonica, passion flowers, and other beautiful plants bloomed around her windows and twined over the porch; and beyond, flights of stone-steps conducted from terrace to terrace, into gardens, upon which she had lavished all the skill and experience acquired in the sunny clime from whence she had just returned.

Pausing a few minutes for a rapid survey of the lovely landscape before her, Maude hurried forwards; for already the rose-tinted clouds on the horizon were beginning to lose their vivid hues as the shades of evening stealthily crept over. Passing through the court, and under the curious old arch

which led to the back of the mansion, she soon found herself on the terrace, upon which most of the principal apartments opened. Mrs. Otway was the only occupant of Lady Catherine's sitting-room when Maude entered. The old lady was reclining very much at her ease in an arm-chair near the window, occupied with her eternal knitting.

"Well, my dear Miss Conway, I am glad to see you at last; Catherine has been expecting you hours ago. She has only just laid down her needle to take a stroll in the flower-garden with Charles Turville. See, there they both are at the end of the terrace," said the old lady, firmly grasping her knitting, lest Maude's sudden incursion should betray her into a slip of the pin.

"I could not come before, Mrs. Otway, or you may be sure you would have seen me. I will go and meet Catherine."

Lady Catherine and her cousin were in deep conversation, and did not perceive Maude's approach until she was close upon them.

"At last, dear Maude, here you are! I have been expecting you ever since two o'clock, you shameful truant," exclaimed Lady Catherine, stepping forwards, with rather heightened colour.

"I could not leave home. Isabella went out with Mrs. St. Priest, and you know mamma is not happy unless one of us remains with her," replied Maude, shaking hands with Mr. Turville.

"I met Mrs. St. Priest and your sister, on their road to Nethercote, as I was on mine hither. You have never been to see my flowers, Miss Conway. I consider myself very ill used. Why did you not drive over with your sister yesterday?" asked Mr. Turville.

"For the same reason that I could not come here earlier to-day. Mamma cannot endure to be left alone."

"And so you have arranged always to stay at home while your sister goes out, Miss Conway? I protest, since my arrival in this neighbourhood (excepting occasionally here) I do not believe I have met you half a dozen times."

"For shame, Charles! With your usual unceremonious language you have brought the colour into Maude's cheeks," exclaimed Lady Catherine, laughingly.

"I am very sorry; but I hope Miss Conway will prove herself as good and amiable as she appears, by forgiving me when I aggravate the offence by saying it becomes her too well for me to repent the words which kindled it."

"Well, Maude, you are the first young lady, including myself, whom I ever heard that matter-of-fact cousin of mine compliment. Upon my word, Charles, I have still some hopes of your becoming, to use the words of the old song,—

"Un chevalier beau, doux, et accompli!"

"Thank you, Catherine. It is some consolation to know that you think about me at all ; so I will not grumble at the manner," replied Mr. Turville, fixing his large dark eyes on his cousin's face. "But do you not think you could manage to drive Miss Conway over to Nethercote to-morrow ? I want her to see my garden before the flower fête."

"Certainly. Maude, will you go ?"

"Yes, if nothing intervenes I should enjoy it very much ; but I cannot promise this evening. I will send you word to-morrow morning, if you will allow me, Catherine."

"Oh, surely for once your sister may stay at home and take care of her mother. Could she not ?" exclaimed the incorrigible Mr. Turville.

Maude could not refrain from laughing.

"Never mind, Charles. He expends all his compliments and polite speeches at Mon-Bijou, and so has little ready coin in hand," rejoined Lady Catherine. "How very intimate Isabella seems to have become all at once with Mrs. St. Priest, Maude ! they are always driving about together now."

"Yes, they are very great friends," replied Maude, hastily.

"Mrs. St. Priest is the most frivolous little doll of a woman I ever met with ; yet I have a strong suspicion under that artificial manner lurk deeper designs. Depend upon it, she is a dangerous woman," said Mr. Turville.

"You ought not to say so, at any rate, Charles."

"Pray, why not ?"

"Because Mrs. St. Priest lauds everywhere, to the extent of her ability, the taste, learning, and divers fascinations of Charles Egremont Turville, Esq.," replied Lady Catherine, laughing.

"You mean, she praises Nethercote and its various eligibilities. I wonder what place in her estimation Charles Egremont Turville would hold without it ? However, I repay her admiration, by allowing her to drive her piebalds there whenever she chooses," rejoined Mr. Turville.

"How very gracious ! She must appreciate the boon."

"So it seems, for she pays Nethercote a visit every third day. You, Catherine, give me one call to her fifty. Why do you not come oftener ?"

The colour came into Lady Catherine's cheek.

"Did you ever hear such a question, Maude ? Shall I never make you understand, Charles, that it is not etiquette for young ladies to pay frequent visits at bachelors' houses ?"

"I consider etiquette a very troublesome thing, when it interferes with pleasant social arrangements," replied Mr. Turville, in grumbling accents.

"Come, Maude, let us go into the house. You must rest, before you commence your walk homewards. Mrs. Otway, also,

will think we are behaving very ill, to leave her alone so long," said Lady Catherine.

Miss Conway assented, though she was not in the least fatigued, and had listened with much amusement to the dialogue between her friend and Mr. Turville. Of the latter's admiration of and predilection for his fair cousin's society, Maude had long had her private opinion; though when challenged at home, she evaded the question. Mr. Egremont Turville had strong sterling sense, keen perception into character, and an energy which, combined with these other two qualities, seldom led him astray, and rendered him more fortunate in the realisation of his projects than most men. He, moreover, possessed the rare qualification of invariably saying what he meant, and doing what he said. This uncommon characteristic sadly discomposed the tactics of such ladies as Mrs. St. Priest, who often found their prettily turned sentences suddenly arrested by one of Mr. Turville's shrewd, downright speeches.

"Well, Mrs. Otway, and how have you been getting on during our absence?" said Mr. Turville, seating himself, soon after they entered the room, by the old lady's side.

"Oh, tolerably well. See, Catherine, my dear, I have finished the stripe I began just before we left Narbonne;" then suddenly reminded, by the gloom which overspread Lady Catherine's face, that Lord Willingham's fatal seizure happened on that night, and seeking to efface the reminiscence her words evoked, Mrs. Otway hastily added,—"I mean, my dear, on the evening Mr. Randolph so suddenly made his appearance."

"Who is this Mr. Randolph I so often hear you talk about, Mrs. Otway?" asked Mr. Turville, fixing his keen eyes on his cousin, whose fair brow and cheeks now rivalled the damask rose in her bosom.

"A very agreeable young Englishman, whose acquaintance we made in Italy," replied Mrs. Otway, resolved to be very guarded in what she said.

"Well, but who is he? what is he? and where does he come from?"

Mrs. Otway looked sadly perplexed.

"Well, Mr. Turville, I am sure I am not quite prepared to answer all these questions. His name is Rauldolph—he also seemed to have plenty of money. I really do not know anything more about him."

"But if he had no introductions, where in the world did you and Catherine meet him?"

"We met him first at Madame Pezzaro's."

"Ah! so he was one of those unfortunate, all-accomplished gentlemen, my good aunt picks up, and exhibits as lions at

her villa. I see now," rejoined Mr. Turville, stealing a searching glance at the Lady Catherine, and then fixing his dark eyes thoughtfully on the ground. "Have you seen anything of that charming, graceful-looking Lady Alresford, Catherine, since I saw you?" demanded he, after a pause.

"I have seen her twice since. Lord Alresford, several times."

"Only twice?"

"No—she came here with the earl two days ago."

"It strikes me, Catherine, you are rather disappointed in the earl's choice. You do not seem half as intimate with Lady Alresford as I expected, or as I am sure you anticipated. Now, tell me what you really think of her."

"Really, Charles, you put such very pertinent questions, that how to frame an answer is sometimes no slight embarrassment," replied Lady Catherine, glancing at Maude.

"Do not trouble yourself to frame an answer, Catherine. Always tell me really what you think, or decline giving an answer at once," said Mr. Turville, in rather a brusque tone.

"Well you need not look so deeply injured," exclaimed Lady Catherine, laughing. "I have no objection to tell you my opinion of the countess. I think her most beautiful and fascinating; but there is coldness in her manner, and a want of warmth in returning all my civilities, which I cannot account for. I am sure she dislikes me."

"My dear Lady Catherine, how can you use such strong expressions?" remonstrated Mrs. Otway, gravely. "The thing which struck me most during the short two hours she spent here on Monday was, that she did not seem devoted enough to her noble-looking husband. I must say I was provoked at her indifference!"

"How romantic you are become, Mrs. Otway! Then you think it *selon les regles* for a wife to show great devotion to her husband in public?" said Mr. Turville, smiling; for he greatly enjoyed putting the old lady on her mettle.

"Good gracious, Mr. Turville! how quickly you take one up! I do not call sitting quietly here in Catherine's room being in public. I question, with all her pretty face and pretty manner, whether Lady Alresford was ever in love with her husband!" said Mrs. Otway with a sagacious nod.

Poor Mildred! Could she but have heard Mrs. Otway's opinion!

"Some lovers' quarrel, I suppose, darkened the matrimonial horizon the morning they visited you, Catherine. I should make a point never to let my wife quarrel with me."

"Admirable! Oh, Charles, what a frank admission; so you would monopolise all the quarrelling yourself?"

A quiet smile curled Mr. Turville's lip.

"Well, Miss Conway, you have not yet spoken. I like to

hear other people's opinion. Do you agree with Catherine, that Lady Alresford lacks animation and warmth of manner, and with Mrs. Otway, that she never was in love with her husband?"

Maude was too truthful to assert what she did not think—and we know she had very good reason to entertain a doubt on this latter point.

"Perhaps there may be a coldness in Lady Alresford's manner; but we must remember she is amongst strangers," replied she, evasively.

"I see you will not venture an opinion upon Mrs. Otway's assertion, Miss Conway," said Mr. Turville, as Maude at that moment arose to take leave.

"You cannot possibly walk home alone," observed Lady Catherine, hastily, as she saw the rising colour on her friend's cheek. "Perhaps Charles will be your knight, Maude, and escort you back to Moreton?"

"I shall be most happy, if Miss Conway will allow me that honour," replied Mr. Turville, promptly.

Miss Conway, however, hesitated, and her face expressed such genuine distress that Lady Catherine gazed astonished. A moment's reflection revealed the source of her friend's discomfiture.

"On second thoughts, Charles, I cannot spare you just now, so pray sit down again; Maude, I am sure, will excuse you; or rather do me the favour to ring, for I am going to send her home in the pony carriage," resumed she quickly.

"Catherine, why would not Miss Conway allow me to escort her home?" asked Mr. Turville, in his driest tones, throwing himself on the couch near his cousin, when he entered the drawing-room again, after handing Maude to the carriage.

"Cannot you guess?"

"No. How should I?"

"Don't you know Miss Conway is engaged to be married, and that there are such things as *mauvaises langues* in the world?"

"What a prudent young lady! I suppose Colonel Sutherland is jealous?"

"No, I never heard that he was. Maude is right for many reasons. You forget the colonel's amiable relative in this neighbourhood."

"True—I forgot;" and Mr. Turville sat silently for some time watching his cousin as she bent over her work-frame. "Catherine," exclaimed he, at length, catching her fair hand as she drew the silk through the canvas, "what a very odd fancy it is of yours to wear *that* ring. I suppose it is your mother's?"

The ring was the one Mr. Randolph placed on her finger in

the cathedral of Narbonne. The diamond guard she always wore, and which purposely completely covered it, had by some accident slipped aside. Hastily she snatched her hand from her cousin's grasp. Luckily, Mr. Turville did not perceive the momentary pallor which spread over her cheek, or the convulsive tremor of her lip, for she sat with her back to the light. With a strong effort, she commanded her voice sufficiently to reply, in the easy tone of their previous discourse,—

"Really, Charles, how impertinent you are growing! I positively will not satisfy your curiosity."

"Catherine, I shall envy that happy man who, with your consent, takes it from your finger to replace it by another," said Mr. Turville, earnestly.

"I cannot see any longer; so, like you, dear Mrs. Otway, must be content to be idle awhile!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, abruptly rising from her embroidery-frame, and approaching the old lady, who lay back, half asleep, in her chair.

"And I must think of riding home. I will go round to the stables for my horse," said Mr. Turville, slowly rising from his chair. "Good-night, Catherine."

"Good-night, Charles."

And Mr. Turville quitted the room, while Lady Catherine buried her face in her hands, and presently bright tears forced themselves between her fingers and dropped upon her dress. Mrs. Otway did not speak, for the obscurity was too great for her to observe the distress of her beloved pupil. Presently the silence was broken by the entrance of the butler with lights; and after he had closed the windows and retired, Mrs. Otway, rousing up, resumed her darling occupation; and Lady Catherine mechanically reseatd herself at her frame. For some time they worked on in silence.

At length Mrs. Otway began :—

"I have not heard you mention Mr. Randolph very lately, my dear. I suppose you receive good news from him?" asked she, hesitatingly; for it was a subject seldom broached between them.

"Yes. I heard about a fortnight ago," responded Lady Catherine, with a sigh.

"When do you expect him in England? That strange visit of his, when we were domiciled in that wretched French place, has always puzzled me. Ah, Catherine, it is a sad, sad thing that we ever fell in with him!" said the old lady, sighing also.

"He has promised to be here,—in England, in two months," replied Lady Catherine, in a low voice.

"Well, I am glad to hear this. I hate mystery! Do you feel to care for him, my dear, after this period of absence, as much as you did at Narbonne?"

"Much, much more."

"I was thinking, yesterday, what your cousin and Lord Alresford will say when they hear of your engagement, my dear, to a man nobody knows anything about——"

"Dear Mrs. Otway, do not let us anticipate evils. Surely, when present, they are hard enough to bear."

"Ah, the present evil, Catherine, is to see you pining in secret, and exerting yourself in public to affect an appearance of happiness! Mr. Randolph told me he had had a long interview with you at Narbonne: did he tell you nothing about himself, my dear?"

Lady Catherine shook her head, while tears dropped on her work.

"Mrs. Rayland, you know, said she met him at some fête in Naples. Now, my dear, what I should advise is, that you make a confidant of Lord Alresford. I know he would find out all about this mysterious lover of yours immediately. It will not do for you to go on in this way, Catherine: a girl, beautiful as you are, and an heiress too! You should not either, my dear, lay too much stress on Lord Willingham's approval; for, during his last illness, he often appeared to me slightly wandering at times. Now, will you apply to the earl?" and Mrs. Otway laid down her knitting, and gazed earnestly into her pupil's face.

Lady Catherine arose; she clasped her hands tightly together.

"Mrs. Otway, if you wish to insure my eternal love and gratitude, promise me profound silence, profound secrecy, on everything respecting Frederic Randolph, for the next three months," said she, in a voice of deep emotion.

"This affair, Catherine, causes me more anxiety than I can describe; but I suppose, as you insist, I must comply with your desire. Nay, my dear, compose yourself, pray: I cannot think what it is that raises such a tumult of passion when this man's name is mentioned," said Mrs. Otway, hastily rising, and throwing her arm around Lady Catherine's waist. "At the expiration of these three months, may I consider myself at liberty to consult your guardian?" persisted Mrs. Otway, with more resolution than was her wont.

"No. I will then myself take measures. But I do not distrust Frederic Randolph; and though six weeks have elapsed since the period he promised to greet me here, I believe him true—honourable! Mark, Mrs. Otway, not a shadow of a doubt lingers on my mind!" and Lady Catherine threw back her beautiful head; but though her features still trembled with excitement, this open assertion of her lover's truth seemed to have infused fresh confidence into her own heart also.

"Well, my dear, all's well that ends well; and I fervently

trust it may prove so in your case," said the old lady, mechanically taking up her knitting again.

Lady Catherine lingered round her friend for a few minutes, and then paced up and down the room. Presently she approached the window, and drew from her bosom the half of the glittering clasp. Alas! it had never yet been used for the purpose it was given.

"I say, Catherine—now don't laugh, my dear—do you not think it just possible, Mr. Randolph may be a Jesuit in disguise? Such things have happened," said Mrs. Otway, with a look and manner of profound sagacity, interrupting the silence which prevailed.

Lady Catherine laughed aloud.

"Nothing could be more unlikely, I assure you, my dear Mrs. Otway. I wonder where your suspicions will travel next!"

Mrs. Otway made no reply, but appeared absorbed in her work.

"Catherine, what a very clever, fascinating young man Charles Turville is! I protest I like him as well as the earl. Don't you think him very agreeable?"

"Very! And now, my dear old friend, as your ruminations seem to have travelled homewards, and it is growing late, we will ring, and summon the household to prayers," said the Lady Catherine.

CHAPTER XVIII.

CONSPIRACY.

MRS. ST. PRIEST, though the most fastidious *petite maitresse* in existence, had always a keen eye to her own interest. She knew money was the grand desideratum which enabled people to outtower their fellows; and, next to her own peerless attractions, she deemed it the thing most easily bartered for the speedy attainment of her scheme of aggrandisement. The income of her late husband, Major St. Priest, amounted to the considerable sum of two thousand per annum, exclusive of his pay. In gratitude for her eager solicitude to smooth his gouty pillow, the major duly bequeathed fifteen hundred a year to his young widow: all in his power to leave; the remaining five hundred of his income, secured on an estate in Cumberland, having been most generously settled by him on his nephew, Edward Sutherland, when the latter first entered the service, an almost penniless cornet. However, in the will was a memorandum of a few lines, over which Mrs. Priest, though so amply dowered, dwelt with unspeakable pleasure and self-gratification. It expressed the desire of the testator, that his nephew, Edward Sutherland, being now so well provided for by the large bequest of his paternal uncle, George Sutherland, Esquire, of the Grove, should relinquish to his widowed aunt, Ada St. Priest, this trifling addition to his income; which would prevent her feeling that diminished affluence was added to the bitter trials of her widowhood. The wish of the deceased major, Mrs. St. Priest took good care, should be forthwith intimated to Colonel Sutherland; but, to her exceeding vexation, instead of receiving by return of post a deed of renunciation of the five hundred per annum, executed in due form, a brief letter only arrived, containing much condolence for her loss, and vague assurances that his uncle's desire should be duly weighed, as soon as professional duties allowed him a single instant to devote to his own concerns. From that time to this, a period of five years, Mrs. St. Priest heard nothing more of the affair. Though intensely provoked, she thought it most politic to keep up a brisk exchange of civilities, to guard against the possibility that he should forget such a person as his uncle's widow existed; and, consequently, no two persons could be on better terms than Colonel Sutherland and herself. He visited her at stated periods of the year, and often on his table lay billets from Mon-Bijou, mingling with newspapers and clumsy business letters, whose strong wiry

addresses stood out in coarse relief against her airy, flowing characters.

The morning Mrs. St. Priest visited Amesbury Park, she received the following letter from Colonel Sutherland :—

“MY DEAR ADA,

“Knowing of old your inimitable dexterity, *de bien connoître votre monde*, as our Gallic neighbours say, and having oftentimes experienced your kindness, do not be surprised if I now venture to entreat you to exercise this admirable ingenuity of yours in my behalf.

“You doubtless remember something of what I told you during my last visit at Mon-Bijou, relative to my desperate *affaire du cœur* with Mildred Effingham, now Lady Alresford. That she (Lady A.) once loved me, and at the time of her marriage cared not a *sou* for her magnifico of a husband, I venture little in asserting; and as for my sentiments towards her, a lady of your discriminative powers will not long be in doubt, after perusing the whole of my letter. Now, *ma belle veuve*, this is what I beseech you to do for me :—drive over to Amesbury at your earliest possible convenience; observe and note attentively how the adorable Mildred speaks, looks, and acts; whether her beautiful eyes beam love or hate on her lord; and tell me the *on dit* of the neighbourhood as to the strength of the *entente cordiale* between them. Have I made myself sufficiently intelligible? Another boon I have to crave—do not think me *exigeant*—will you receive me during the first week of next month as your guest?

“By-the-bye, it may be as well to tell you, though I had nearly forgotten, that I have had an interview with old Buxton, one of the deceased major’s executors, and, I doubt not, in a month or two we shall be able to arrange the trifling affair of the Cotgrove estate to your satisfaction. I owe you a thousand apologies for deferring its settlement so long.

“Adieu, *ma belle veuve*! You may divine the impatience I shall await the report penned by your fairy fingers. Humbly kissing your hands,

“I remain, yours, very faithfully,
“EDWARD SUTHERLAND.”

The eyes of the widow glistened with satisfaction, as she perused the interesting document. Already she felt Cotgrove and its acres to be her own. Impatient of the least delay, before she put the machinery in motion which was to bring about this desirable result, the moment she finished luncheon she stepped into her phaeton, and set off for Amesbury. How she comported herself in the presence of the earl and his bride,

we have already related ; but on her return home, she descended to her boudoir, and wrote the subjoined epistle :—

“MY DEAR EDWARD,

“In compliance with your wish, I drove over this afternoon to Amesbury. *Apropos*, what a barbarian you were to lure me into the den of this most exclusive of exclusive earls! However, I have since thought it was a happily-conceived project, to storm the fortress during the honeymoon ; for it still beamed propitiously enough to sweeten my *entrée*.

“Well, Edward, I admire this countess of yours excessively. I never saw a more splendid creature ; and, comparatively speaking, Maude Conway is not worthy to hold a candle to illumine such beauty. As for the terms she is on with her lord and master, I cannot at present quite determine. There is evidently a something ; she is not at her ease, I mean, in the full confidence of being beloved. In the midst of all her splendour, I remarked a restless roving of the eye ; especially in the presence of Lady Catherine Neville, who came to pay her visit whilst I was at Amesbury. I will examine more attentively ; for I have exceeded your request, though I flatter myself, scarcely surpassed what you anticipated from my friendship, having, I think, created a favourable impression on your divinity : and be sure nothing shall be left undone on my part to promote a friendly interchange of visits—*et puis après nous verrons*. From all I have as yet heard and seen, my advice to you is combined in the one word—*persevere* !

“To throw a little light on the internal economy of the household at Amesbury, I directed my maid to scrape an acquaintance with the countess’s *soubrette* ; but to no purpose ; Mademoiselle Aglaë was as mute as a tench, and all Sandford’s pumping went for naught.

“Now, Edward, I want to know whether you seriously intend to enter the lists, and attempt to flirt with this exquisite countess, in the very teeth of her handsome-looking husband ? If so, all I have to say is, that you are a courageous man, to hope to prevail against so dangerous a rival. Now, do not be angry : remember the proverb “*blancas manos no ofenden*,” and if you come off the victor the greater your glory. I think I have given you all the information at present gleaned ; but *I shall be vigilant* !

“In conclusion, I can only express my hope that you will give me the pleasure of your company at any time, for as long as you find it agreeable to remain at Mon-Bijou, and believe me ever,

“*Votre parfaite amie,*

“ADA ST. PRIEST.”

This letter duly despatched, Mrs. St. Priest dined with more than her usual gusto, and afterwards sat down to spend a long solitary evening, with a mind and temper more in unison with her outward deportment than they had ever been since the day she heard herself proclaimed unfettered mistress of fifteen hundred a year.

In about three weeks from the date of the widow's despatch, Lady Alresford drove over to Mon-Bijou, accompanied, however, by her husband. Her visit was a brief one, and no new lights flashed across the imaginative genius of their hostess. A little increase of cordiality, as she conceived, in the countess's manner, consoled her, nevertheless, at the time for this disappointment. Another fortnight elapsed, and no fresh visit of Lady Alresford's was on record in her journal; she had called at Amesbury, and was refused admittance. Mrs. St. Priest was in despair. Three more days and the colonel was to arrive at Mon-Bijou: how, then, would her boastful assurances of her growing intimacy with the countess be realised?

One morning, as she sat pondering over the adverse turn affairs had taken, and moodily calculating the various luxuries that the additional five hundred to her income might insure: which now, most probably, it would be her hard fate for ever to forego; the sound of carriage wheels rolling up to the door, smote upon her ear. Swiftly she sprang from the couch to the window overlooking the verandah, and actually clasped her hands together in ecstasy, when she perceived that her visitor was no other than the wished-for Lady Alresford; and what was more, the countess came alone.

And it was, indeed, Mildred who now sat awaiting admittance at the portal of the artful, the designing Mrs. St. Priest; but Mildred, totally altered and unlike the bright being who, in days of yore, cheered all around by her sunny smile of gladness. Now, all was changed; the dark spot was gradually stealing over her heart, rendering her existence joyless and burdensome. As her whole being yielded to the passionate love her husband now inspired, there came as a natural consequence the depreciation of self, the distrust of her own powers to captivate, and turn back again into their legitimate channel, affections which she concluded were either enthralled by another, or alienated past recovery by former frivolity and rejection. But side-by-side with this humiliating estimate of self—contradictory as it may appear—and, in proportion to her love, sprang up a deep burning resentment, that her beauty, her wit, and above all the half repentance she had expressed, had not brought the earl again to her feet—had not brought one petition for her love—no, not one direct mark of affection; for indirect ones Mildred's proud heart scorned to accept. She, therefore, hardened herself in the belief of his in-

difference ; and though, in the earl's presence, pride and resentment enabled her to play the erroneous part she had imposed upon herself, and to close her lips from speaking words kind, gentle, loving—such as she fancied sometimes his eyes implored her to utter—her solitary hours, and now these were many, were spent in tears too bitter for words of comfort, such even as her mother's and Helen's letters contained, to assuage.

Mildred's fault, the source of all her misery, was a mistaken pride combined with a want of integrity ; which led her, from the very first date of her correspondence with her betrothed, to conceal the source of her secret discomfort—which betrayed her into the fatal error of attempting to retrieve the ground she fancied she had lost, by exciting in his bosom a sentiment of pique and jealous umbrage. Her principal defect, in a word, was essaying to obtain by circuitous route that to which but one broad beaten tract properly led. She wanted firm moral courage and unswerving rectitude of purpose. "Honesty is the best policy" is a trite old maxim, and Mildred would have found it so ; but, unfortunately, experience had not yet taught her its truth.

We trust our readers will pardon us if we transgress the due routine of the chapter, and request them to turn back with us for a few minutes to Amesbury, and witness the little scene which preceded Mildred's departure thence for Mon-Bijou.

Lady Alresford was seated in her boudoir. She held before her some kind of work ; but it was her mind that laboured, not her fingers. Her beautiful garden bloomed with unflagging lustre, and the fountain gurgled and threw up jets of water clear as a sunbeam. Yet all this beauty was lost upon her, and her eye turned coldly aside. Presently she raised her head, and a slight flush suffused her cheek, as she heard a step which she knew could be but that of her husband ; for her garden was held sacred against all other intruders. Soon he stood before the open window.

"Mildred, will you drive with me to Wardour Court ? I want you to take Lady Catherine those specimens of orchideous plants she admired so much, and which we promised to give her," said Lord Alresford.

Always Lady Catherine ! thought Mildred.

"I do not feel inclined to drive to-day ; so I must beg you will excuse me. Cannot you send Ferguson with the plants to Wardour Court ?" replied she coldly ; rising, however, and approaching the window where the earl stood.

"No ; I know the flowers will give Lady Catherine double pleasure if you will present them, Mildred. So do let me prevail upon you—you have only made two visits to Wardour since your marriage."

"I am sorry to refuse any request of yours, Lord Alresford; but I cannot go to Wardour to-day," responded she, turning decisively away.

"Are you ill, Mildred?" asked the earl, in accents of surprise.

"No, perfectly well."

"Then, why will you not go?"

Mildred hesitated: the truth trembled on her lips. Alas, she had not courage to utter it; or, perhaps, pique restrained her tongue.

"I have no especial reason," replied she, in a low voice, turning away to hide the tears which, despite her efforts, swam in her eyes.

Lord Alresford paused a few minutes. Mildred's head was pertinaciously bent over a vase of flowers on the table.

"I am sorry, Mildred, that you appear so resolved to deprive me of the pleasure of your society; but as I cannot suffer Lady Catherine to be disappointed for your groundless caprice, I shall ride over and take the plants myself," said he, in a tone of displeasure, walking away.

Mildred remained motionless for a few seconds: Lady Catherine's shadow cast a gloom over her heart. At length she arose, and with feelings of supreme indignation, resolving not to remain at home slighted and solitary, she ordered her carriage; and, after reflecting on the most feasible expedition to exert her independence, desired her coachman to drive to Mrs. St. Priest's.

Mon-Bijou, or Mount Bi-jew, as the place was popularly termed among the neighbouring rustics, was a small, low, compactly-built two-storied house, covered with ivy. A five minutes' drive through a thick copse-like plantation led up to the hall-door; or, properly speaking, to the end of a long, projecting verandah, extending round one side of the house, paved with slabs, and bordered by deep boxes, placed along the wall, filled with flowering shrub and various odoriferous plants.

When Mildred entered Mrs. St. Priest's luxurious boudoir, she found her reclining negligently on a couch, with Donna sleeping on a crimson satin cushion at her feet. By the side of the sofa stood a rosewood work-table, upon which was a book, an ivory crotchet-needle, sundry coloured silks and gold thread, and a glass of *eau sucrée*. The widow was attired in a loose *peignoir* of sky-blue silk, and on her blonde tresses was lightly perched a small cap of the finest lace, *confectionné*, as milliners would express it, with consummate taste. Rose-coloured blinds excluded the light from the apartment, the atmosphere of which was laden with the heavy perfume of numerous bouquets in vases of the richest Sevres china or Bohemian glass.

"My dear countess, I am so enchanted to see you! I cannot thank you sufficiently for the honour of this visit," exclaimed Mrs. St. Priest, in her most winning tones, lightly springing from the couch, as Mildred was ushered in.

"Thank you; you are very kind," replied Mildred, taking the hand Mrs. St. Priest eagerly proffered.

"I fancied I never more was to see you, *ma belle comtesse*—that somehow or other, you deemed my early visit intrusive; and you cannot imagine how miserable the thought made me."

"I assure you, Mrs. St. Priest, such a feeling never existed. But, latterly, I have had much to do, and numerous visits to return, replied Mildred, with her sweet smile.

"Yes, I well remember that *les premiers mois de noce sont les plus beaux de notre vie*—everything then seems *couleur de rose*, and one breathes in a kind of ideal world. Alas, all that's fair must speedily fade, in sentiment as well as in reality!" said the widow, affectedly.

"It does so; and prematurely sometimes: failing to be appreciated, it withers for lack of sympathy!" rejoined Mildred, with some asperity of tone; for her heart was very sore.

Mrs. St. Priest opened wide her large blue eyes, and fixed them inquiringly on her visitor.

"A bride of two months, and already a philosopher! My dear Lady Alresford, pray excuse me: it is positively something quite unique to hear you talk thus. It reminds me of the hungry man who, overpowered by the *embarras* of many good things set before him, sighed for a mouldy crust," said Mrs. St. Priest, in her most playful manner.

"It, indeed, behoves me to be very thankful for the many elements of happiness Providence has mingled in my lot," replied Mildred, quickly; for there was something in the tone of her hostess which displeased her.

"You are, indeed, highly favoured, Lady Alresford. 'Tis to such persons as myself—alone, solitary, severed from the interchange of the nearest and dearest commune of heart—that this much-vaunted sunny world of ours appears bleak and dreary," said Mrs. St. Priest, heaving a deep sigh, while her pretty blue eyes filled with tears.

"Nay, Mrs. St. Priest, you should not say so. Depend upon it, could all secrets be disclosed, you would find yourself as well off as your neighbours. Happiness and prosperity, I am convinced, are pretty nearly equalised in this world; and what seems lost on one side is gained on another: though, of course I do not mean to deny there may be special deviations from this general standard."

"Ah! *ma belle comtesse*, it is very well for you, at the summit of worldly felicity, thus to moralise. Contentment to us, who stand rather low in the scale of this world's prosperity, is

rather a difficult task to learn. But I have not yet made due inquiry after the health of Lord Alresford. I trust he is well?" asked Mrs. St. Priest, abruptly; for argument was not her forte.

"Quite well, I thank you," replied Mildred.

"I have had a visit this morning from Sir Gerard, and Lady Emily Baynton. I suppose they took me *en passant* to Amesbury or Wardour Court; for otherwise I am seldom favoured with a call. Have you seen them, Lady Alresford?"

"No; but a visit from Sir Gerard would have given me great pleasure. He has called twice since his return from the Priory upon Lord Alresford; but both times we were unfortunately from home," replied Mildred, her thoughts instantly reverting to her friend Helen Campbell.

"Sir Gerard is a most lively, agreeable personage. As for Lady Emily, though a paragon of virtue, she is the very embodiment of everything stiff, prim, and puritanical!" said Mrs. St. Priest, with a light laugh.

Mildred laughed also; but it was at the contrast between the two descriptions she had heard of Lady Emily's character.

"Sir Gerard, nevertheless, believes there never was a woman who united so many perfections."

"Yes; but I am sure she must think her son on the high road to perdition, and travelling anywhere but heavenwards! I dare say, they are gone to Wardour Court; for Lady Catherine Neville always did *tout son possible* to draw them thither, by flattering the mother and smiling on the son."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Mildred anxiously, longing to ask more, yet fearing to appear too interested. "I cannot understand, however, what motive Lady Catherine can have for flattering either Sir Gerard or his mother."

"My dear Lady Alresford, when you have been in this neighbourhood a little longer, you will understand its politics better," replied Mrs. St. Priest, with her most enchanting smile. "It was said—though I do not affirm it, for public rumour is generally but a tissue of scandal—that Lady Catherine's object in flirting with Sir Gerard was to pique her guardian, Lord Alresford, into an offer; but this report, of course, was treated as groundless slander when his lordship's engagement to yourself was made public. Now people are abominable and malicious enough to fancy, at the present moment, that she hopes, by the same means, to captivate her rich and good-looking cousin, Mr. Egremont Turville."

"I consider both reports groundless and malicious as could possibly be fabricated. Why need Lady Catherine, with her beauty and talents, resort to such a disgraceful, unwomanly device?" replied Mildred; not choosing to show the impression the widow's words created.

"Everyone is tolerably well persuaded, hereabouts, that Sir Gerard Baynton is not a marrying man—at least so long as his old dowager of a mother lives—though a terrible dangler after any pretty young woman; and the earl, before his marriage, was so much at Wardour! Of course, Lady Catherine understood his attention to be brotherly, and offered in compassion to her forlorn position; but the world did not—and hence the rumour."

"You do but render Lady Catherine Neville justice, I feel convinced, Mrs. St. Priest," said Lady Alresford, gravely.

"Any woman, however, might be proud of arresting even the passing glance of such a man as your husband, Lady Alresford: and perhaps, *ma foi*! poor Lady Catherine's wishes outran her prudence, and knowing what a marvellous stimulant pique is in diseases of the heart, she levelled this formidable weapon at her guardian, in ignorance of the silken fetters which rendered him proof against her blandishments," said Mrs. St. Priest, shrugging her ivory shoulders.

"It cannot be possible! The world must basely have misconstrued Lady Catherine's motives. *She* certainly knew of Lord Alresford's engagement!" said Mildred, musingly, without knowing exactly what she uttered; for her mind was busied searching, amongst the endless webs imagination had spun, for a thread to unite with the suspicion so insidiously poured into her ear.

A sudden gleam shot across the widow's azure eye; for, quick as thought, her fingers grasped the clue which should lead her through the intricacies of Mildred's heart. Lady Alresford was jealous,—or at least uneasy, at the influence exercised over her husband by his ward!

"Everyone in the neighbourhood was surprised at the news of the earl's engagement: it created quite a sensation; and I heard Lady Catherine audibly express her astonishment, in common with the rest of the world. But do you know, *chère comtesse*, there is always something to me inexplicable in her ardent, imaginative disposition—something one shrinks from, in the deep glow and dazzle of her wild-looking eyes. It is the fashion here to sing her praise at every turn; but I am not one of her blind devotees."

"Indeed, Mrs. St. Priest, I think, then, you are very unjust towards Lady Catherine. I consider her one of the most charming persons I ever met; nor, I must repeat, do I see how the dissimulation, you tell me, the world attributes to her, could avail. A girl must either be madly in love, or her chances at very desperate issue, when she resorts to the expedient of playing off one man against another," said Lady Alresford carelessly, turning over the leaves of a richly bound album on the table: but while her lips thus censured, somehow Mildred's

conscience smote her on this point; hence Mrs. St. Priest's words sank the deeper.

"Do you not see how this expedient could serve her, Lady Alresford? then, I will tell you. But to illustrate my meaning, forgive me for using a very homely simile. Don't you know, that if you heap coals on a fire, and suffer them for any length of time to lie undisturbed, they smoulder, and grow sluggish; take up the poker, give them a sharp rap, and they speedily kindle again into vivid flame. Now, Lady Catherine hoped Sir Gerard would play this friendly part of the poker, and so set—Mr. Egremont Turville's heart in a blaze!" rejoined Mrs. St. Priest, pausing with consummate art, before she uttered the name of him against whom all this artifice was supposed to be directed.

"You appear to consider that such expedients at times produce desirable results?" said Mildred, still nonchalantly turning over the pages of the book.

"*Certes!* in some cases, I believe the remedy infallible. Men are such inconstants, that security is sure to be followed by satiety, and their roving hearts wander elsewhere. A little pique works wonders. This is precisely the case with my friend, Edward Sutherland. Miss Conway bears his infidelities with the patience and resignation of a martyr; now, if she would put him on the *qui vive* by flirting elsewhere, she would probably find him at her feet. It would positively be an act of the greatest kindness and charity to make her jealous; for, poor girl, I fear she is much more in love with Edward than he is with her!" exclaimed Mrs. St. Priest, watching the rising colour on Mildred's cheek.

"Has Colonel Sutherland been long engaged to Miss Conway?" asked she at length.

"About a year, or eighteen months. His residence at Stanmore did poor Maude irreparable injury. He always quotes you, Lady Alresford, as his model of grace, beauty, and talent: *la perle des perles* of everything he can conceive enchanting in woman."

"Colonel Sutherland, we all know, is a proficient in the art of delicate flattery," said Mildred, pushing aside the book and rising, for the clock over the chimney-piece chimed half-past four.

"Oh, do not go yet, pray, dear Lady Alresford. I want to show you first a magnificent calceolaria in the greenhouse, of which my good old gardener is not a little proud," exclaimed Mrs. St. Priest, rising eagerly from the sofa.

Mildred assented, and after walking round the garden two or three times, and listening for twenty minutes longer to Mrs. St. Priest's trifling nonsense, she was permitted to take leave and drive homewards.

And Lady Alresford's sensations on her visit, were on the whole pleasurable.

When the carriage stopped at her own door, the earl came forwards, and handed her out without word, or comment.

And did Mildred, during their long *tête-à-tête* that evening, seek to heal this second trifling breach between them? Did she offer an explanation of her sudden expedition, and acknowledge that pique had made her capricious; caprice, petulant; and petulance, unkind and ungracious?

No!

CHAPTER XIX.

THE DEVICE OF THE RING.

SOME days elapsed, and Mildred neither saw nor heard anything more of Mrs. St. Priest; but the widow's insidious words sank deep into her heart, and much did she meditate thereupon. Was it, indeed, the certainty that she was bound to him by permanent and indissoluble ties, which nursed her husband's cold indifference, both from the period she had voluntarily renewed her engagement, and since her marriage—and could it be that if, by the skilful exercise of her many attractions on others, this security might be shaken, she should witness his scorn and disregard vanish before the terrible fear of losing her for ever? A bright gleam of joy thrilled her heart as she sat and pondered thus. Disregarding the many warnings of the past, she still blindly refused diligently to search out and follow the one little path of truth and rectitude, and obstinately wandered amid the plausible ways of deceit and subterfuge. She had yet to learn, to do evil that good may come, is of all devices the most hollow and fallacious!

From the day of her visit to Mrs. St. Priest, a marked change was apparent in her demeanour. She assumed a more *insouciant* manner and air; she forced a higher flow of spirits, and the gentle deprecating voice she sometimes imagined he loved to hear, grew more decided and independent in its tones. Her beautiful eyes were more studiously averted than ever; but in proportion to her neglect arose the earl's *sang froid*: he seemed content to take her in any tone she chose. To conceal the anguish of her heart, Mildred spent much of her time alone in her boudoir. Her mornings were passed in ineffectual efforts to forget her miseries in the exercise of her favourite

art, painting; her evenings, in feigned gaiety, or gloomy silence. When the earl perceived the latter was her mood, he usually proposed to read aloud; and Mildred would then throw herself on a couch, and listen to his voice until tears poured down her cheeks; when, on the first opportunity, she generally seized some pretext, and betook herself to a hasty flight to indulge her sorrow in silence and solitude. Lord Alresford at first seemed surprised, and even alarmed, at these sudden withdrawals, and, after awaiting her return for some time, generally despatched a kind and urgent inquiry after her health; an embassy of which Aglaë acquitted herself very ill, as she did not scruple to express to her mistress that she thought the earl ought to be his own messenger.

One evening, as she was thus making her precipitate exit, almost incapable of restraining the sobs that some half-hour's musing on her position provoked, the fringe of her scarf caught the corner of a flower-stand, from which, blinded by her tears, she made an ineffectual attempt to extricate herself. Lord Alresford, observing her difficulty, instantly came to her assistance, and quietly disentangling the scarf, placed it again on her shoulders. She turned in mute thanks, and he then perceived that her eyes were brimful of tears, and her lips quivering with suppressed emotion.

"I would you deemed me worthy of your confidence! Say, dear Mildred, what can I do for you?" said the earl, in a low voice, as he threw his arm around her waist, and gently drew her towards him.

Oh, Mildred, why did not some guardian angel then inspire you with resolution to confess at once your doubts and bitter disquietude?

For one brief instant she pressed her fair cheek on his bosom, and, without daring to raise her eyes, lest she should read pity and disdain in the deep glance bent upon her, she hurriedly disengaged herself from his arms, and fled the apartment. And the dark veil clung to her heart.

Mildred, however, was deceived, because she would resolutely shut her heart to conviction. Though every morning and evening of her life she put up the prayer that happiness might be restored to her, her resolution was not fervent and sincere to follow unswervingly the pure inward impulses of right which might be vouchsafed to her petition; consequently, her prayer was unanswered, and her self-deceit suffered to abide. Nor could she console herself with the reflection that Lord Alresford's coldness, or denial of her request to remove from Amesbury, afforded any justification for her culpable reserve. She, who alone created the division in the first instance, and who now refused the slightest conciliation, or confidence, in return for the unbounded indulgence showered

upon her—and this after solemnly pledging her hand to him again—might well stand convicted in the earl's esteem of heartless duplicity. All that night, after the little scene we have recorded, did Mildred spend in restless meditation ; but, as its basis was unsubstantial, so did it profit her nothing, and she arose with a mind still perturbed and vacillating.

The following morning dawned, bright, clear, and warm, and no one rejoiced at this more than Mr. Egremont Turville, for it was the day of the flower fête at Nethercote ; and, moreover, it would bring the presence of his beautiful cousin, the Lady Catherine—a pleasure Mr. Turville prized infinitely more than his floral show. Mildred, who had totally forgotten, until reminded by Aglaë, that by Lord Alresford's desire she had accepted Mr. Turville's invitation, gazed with feelings of dismay on her swollen eyelids and pallid cheeks ; but after an hour or two spent in the open air in the seclusion of her own little garden, her beautiful face recovered much of its usual expression of calm composure. She sighed as Aglaë's busy fingers speedily arrayed her, for Mr. Turville's fête to her had no attractions ; and with that feeling of isolation at heart,—that icy feeling which seems to exclude all participation or fellowship in the pursuits of others,—she descended and joined her husband in the library.

The grounds at Nethercote were laid out with infinite taste and skill ; as Mr. Turville's passion for flowers prompted him to spare no expense to fill his parterres with the choicest specimens, and most brilliant hues. And a lovely sight it was as Mildred and her husband drove up. The undulating lawn was studded with clumps of rhododendrons, white lilac, scarlet, in beautiful contrast with the green turf ; and beyond, the eye revelled in the rich dazzling hues of the flower garden. Shrubs of all descriptions formed a verdant background to the garden, which was laid out in the Italian style, with stone vases and borders to the parterres. Pyramids of rare hothouse plants were dispersed here and there on the lawn, perfuming the air with their fragrance. Besides, there was every species of amusement for the diversion of his guests that Mr. Turville's ingenuity could suggest : archery, cricket, boating ; and as Mr. Vernon, the distant relation from whom he inherited the estate, had been imbued with a fancy for filling his house with all sorts of curiosities, old pictures, china, *bijouterie*, miniatures, and articles of *vertu*, in the most delightful variety, all these Mr. Turville had also made available for their entertainment.

On one side of the lawn grew two noble sycamores, near which Mr. Turville stationed himself to welcome his guests. A great number of ladies were already there assembled when Lady Alresford approached ; all looking very picturesque, as

she thought, grouped together in the mellowed light, as they sat under the trees. Amongst them she speedily descried Lady Catherine and Mrs. Otway, and at a little distance Lady Normanton and her two daughters.

Mildred fancied there was a kind of restraint in Lady Catherine's greeting. However, she promptly made room for her on the sofa upon which she and Mrs. Otway sat.

"I have not seen you for a very long time at Wardour, Mildred," said she, after a short interval.

"I acknowledge myself a sad defaulter, Catherine, in my return of all your kindness; but I hope soon to atone for my past negligence," replied Mildred, coldly.

"I have no doubt your ladyship finds too many attractions in your beautiful new home to feel often inclined to quit it," observed Mrs. Otway.

"Indeed, you are right, Mrs. Otway. Lord Alresford's generous indulgence has there lavished upon me everything heart could desire," rejoined Lady Alresford, warmly.

"Well, Mildred, I shall be very much inclined to quarrel with the earl, if he and all your pretty things are ever destined to monopolise your entire attention," said Lady Catherine, coldly.

"You are very kind to wish to see me, Catherine; I assure you, I will very soon drive over to Wardour," replied Mildred, in kindlier tones. "Lord Alresford did pay you a visit a few days ago, I believe."

"Yes; he brought some plants; for which, dear Mildred, I feel very ungrateful not to have thanked you before. It was very kind of you to comply with my request so promptly."

"I believe your thanks are solely due to the earl," replied Lady Alresford, turning to speak to Lady Normanton, who, that minute, came up to shake hands with her.

Lady Catherine and Mrs. Otway exchanged glances.

"Well, Lady Alresford, this is a pretty sight. The day has been propitious for Mr. Egremont Turville, has it not?" said Lady Normanton, as Mildred arose and walked away with her.

"Yes; it is most delicious weather, and on such a day a flower fête is the most enjoyable thing in the world."

"Very! There are some people, Lady Alresford, on whom the sun always shines; and Mr. Turville, I think, is one of them. I wish to goodness, however, he would have more care for the comfort of his less fortunate friends, and, instead of keeping them standing here, conduct them to the friendly shelter of the marquee yonder. Really, my daughters have not the least regard for the tortures I endure from brow ache, or they would not suffer me to leave home with such an absurdity of a parasol as this, instead of a dark one to soften the

odious dazzle of the sun!" exclaimed Lady Normanton, impatiently shaking the delicate sky-blue parasol in her hand.

"If we retreat into the shade, Lady Normanton, perhaps you will feel less incommoded," suggested Mildred, gently.

"Yes; let us go and sit awhile in the tent. Did you ever suffer from brow ache, Lady Alresford?"

"No, never," replied Mildred, evincing no disposition for a *tête-à-tête*.

"I think nobody in the world seems to suffer but myself. There is Maude, who never endures a day of pain; and as for Isabella, her ailments spring from nothing but absurd megrims and vapours when she cannot obtain what she wishes," responded Lady Normanton, fretfully.

Mildred looked at her peevish companion in surprise.

"Miss Conway appears to possess excellent health and spirits. What an exceedingly pleasing countenance she has!" said Mildred, looking at Maude's animated face, as she conversed with Mr. Turville, and Lord Alresford.

"Yes, Maude's face is well enough, though not to be compared with her sister's: Isabella loses half her attractions by lazy nonchalance. But here come Sir Gerard Baynton and his mother. I wonder how many more people Mr. Turville expects! I suppose we must remain here, or Lady Emily will be offended: people are so susceptible nowadays!"

With no little curiosity and interest, Mildred watched the approach of Sir Gerard and his mother. Lady Emily leaned on her son's arm. Her age, apparently, averaged between fifty and sixty; her carriage was very erect; and her complexion still clear and smooth as in her most blooming days. Her features were regular and pleasing, and over all was diffused such an air of calm serenity and thought—her eye beamed with so benevolent a lustre, and the smile which hung on her still beautiful mouth had something so good, so genuine in its expression—that Mildred was inexpressibly charmed, and no longer wondered at Sir Gerard's enthusiastic devotion to such a mother. Lady Emily was dressed very simply: she wore a purple satin gown, a richly embroidered cloak, and a white bonnet, contrasting admirably with the delicate pink which still suffused her cheeks; thanks to early temperate habits, and a mind serene, at peace with itself and with all the world. Mildred watched, almost with envy, her friendly greetings with Lady Catherine and the earl. Presently, Sir Gerard Baynton glanced quickly round, and hastened towards her.

"Well, Lady Alresford, I only hope you feel half the delight this meeting with you again gives me, and then, I am sure, you will bestow upon me a very warm welcome," said Sir Gerard, in his frank, cordial voice, warmly shaking her by the hand.

"Indeed, I am very, very glad to see you again, Sir Gerard."

"How are they all at the Priory? When did you hear last from Lady Elvaston?"

"This morning: dear mamma writes in much better spirits."

"I am delighted to hear it. A wedding, after all, is one of the most melancholy things in the world. How is Miss Campbell?"

"Quite well, and still mamma's guest. I cannot tell you the comfort dear Helen has been to her!"

"I am sure of it. Miss Campbell never bestows her society in vain. She is something like my mother, whose every thought, if revealed, would be found a benefit to her neighbour. Do you expect Miss Campbell soon at Amesbury?"

"Not just at present. I hope she will accompany mamma when she visits me," replied Mildred, evasively.

"You know I remained at the Priory for more than a fortnight after your marriage, Lady Alresford. I cannot express to you how swiftly and pleasantly the time fled; and before I left I had the pleasure of hearing that the preliminaries of my friend Miss Tennyson's marriage with Mr. Frank Norwood were arranged; and, moreover, received from the bride elect a most pressing invitation to her wedding, which event is to come off next spring," said Sir Gerard, laughingly.

"Yes; Clara wrote me a long detail of her conquest. It has been a speedy, and I sincerely trust may prove a happy one; though I must confess I should consider a marriage with Mr. Norwood a very hazardous affair."

"So should I, indeed, Lady Alresford," exclaimed Sir Gerard, laughing. "After you left, we had a most ludicrous adventure at Settringham, which I verily believe emboldened Mr. Norwood to pop the momentous question to the fair Clara. Lady Elvaston, Miss Campbell, and myself, were invited by Lady Tennyson to join a boating party on her famous lake. All went on in capital style for some time, when, by an extraordinary inadvertence on Mr. Norwood's part, the boat in which he was rowing Miss Tennyson alone, capsized, and down they both went into the water. Clara screamed, but Mr. Norwood bore her up gallantly in his arms, and before anybody could hasten to her rescue, deposited her safely in a dead faint on the bank. Luckily, Helen—Miss Campbell declined joining the pair in the boat, though much pressed to do so, and, therefore, was quite ready to proffer any assistance required. Now, do you not think this a most romantic episode?"

"Very. After the first disagreeable shock, it must have made Clara feel a heroine for the day," replied Mildred, laughing.

"Oh, I assure you, her sweeping majesty afterwards was

inimitable! However, in spite of her *brusque* oddities of manner, Miss Tennyson has a good heart and an admirable temper, and I think is just the wife for Norwood. But, Lady Alresford, I want to hear your opinion of our neighbourhood. How do you like us all?"

"I have received the utmost kindness and attention from everyone: but I will answer your question, Sir Gerard, this day six months. I do not feel to know anybody thoroughly here but yourself!"

"Not Lady Catherine Neville?"

"No; as yet I know very little of Lady Catherine, and have only ascertained to my satisfaction that she is beautiful and accomplished."

There was something in Lady Alresford's tone which made Sir Gerard turn and look at her earnestly.

"I do not think Alresford is looking so well as he did some months ago. Has anything been the matter, Lady Alresford?" asked Sir Gerard, thoughtfully, gazing at the earl.

"Not that I am aware of, Sir Gerard," replied Mildred, anxiously following the direction of his eyes.

At this moment Mrs. St. Priest's piebalds were seen trotting briskly up the avenue.

"Come, Lady Alresford, I want to make you and my mother known to each other. Do let me introduce her before Mrs. St. Priest's arrival," said Sir Gerard, offering his arm.

Mildred took it, and they joined the group under the sycamores. After exchanging a few words with Lady Emily, who was conversing with the earl, she took a seat by Sir Gerard.

"Who can Mrs. St. Priest have brought with her? I fancied I caught sight of a pair of moustachios as the carriage passed. I have taken an unconquerable dislike to this little fantastic *parvenue*!" said Sir Gerard, with curling lip.

Presently Mrs. St. Priest, all perfume, gossamer, and smiles, joined the group, leaning on the arm of a gentleman. Sir Gerard uttered an exclamation of surprise, and Mildred, turning quickly round, found herself *vis-à-vis* to Colonel Sutherland. She started in spite of herself, and the colour suffused her cheeks and brow, as on the instant she felt his full, bold gaze bent upon her. She looked at her husband; he stood unmoved, talking with the greatest *sang froid* to Lady Emily. She glanced at Maude Conway, who, with admirable self-command, continued her conversation, in a low tone, with Mr. Turville; though the increased bloom on her cheek showed that she was not quite so insensible as she wished to appear. A feeling of intense irritation arose in Mildred's breast, as she noted the little anxiety manifested by the earl, who presently turned altogether aside from her to address the Lady Catherine.

After some little time devoted to paying his *devoirs* to Lady

Normanton, and accounting for his unexpected presence in his usual off-hand style, Colonel Sutherland came up to Lady Alresford, and apparently encouraged by the warmth of her greeting, took a seat by her side, while Maude Conway presently arose, and walked away in the direction of the house, with her friend Lady Catherine. Sir Gerard immediately sauntered off also, while Mildred had the satisfaction to see the earl interrupt his discourse with Lady Emily, and for a few brief moments rivet his attention upon herself; and her heart throbbed with pleasure, as she fancied she detected a slight uneasiness, and dissatisfaction in his manner, when he withdrew his glance. Her spirits rose, and the beautiful colour sparkled in her cheek as she listened, and responded to the colonel's flattery.

"My dear Lady Alresford, what can possess your *caro sposo* to-day? I never saw his brow wreathed before with such dark majesty. *Foi d'honneur*, one would suppose he was jealous of poor Edward, and that you were successfully availing yourself of the remedy I horrified you a few days ago by recommending as an admirable stimulant for *un amour usé*," whispered Mrs. St. Priest in her prettiest, and most insinuating tones. "Edward, pray, excuse me," continued she, after a pause, still *sotte voce*, "my eye is wonderfully attracted by that ring of yours. I never observed it before; pray, let me look. Is it an antique?"

"I do not know. I would not, however, exchange it, or even take it from my finger, for anything in the world; so, Ada, you must content yourself with viewing my precious jewel where it is."

"Oh, a *gage d'amour*!" laughed Mrs. St. Priest, as she arose, and walked away to join Isabella Conway.

Mildred glanced negligently on the ring. All at once her colour wavered, and her lips became very white, though her beautiful eyes flashed with indignation. The ring was an antique, the one given to her by the earl on the day of their betrothment. Colonel Sutherland, during the early days of their intimacy, playfully drew it from her finger, and all remembrance of the transaction had faded from Mildred's recollection, until now it flashed upon her with bewildering distinctness. What would the earl say to her careless disregard of his gift? and still more, what would he feel and think when he saw it arrogantly displayed on the colonel's hand? What was now to be done? How was she to regain possession of the precious pledge, and, if possible, hide her faithlessness from her husband? These thoughts passed swiftly as an arrow's course through her mind. She turned again towards Lord Alresford. She thought he looked grave; their eyes met, and in a few minutes he came towards her.

"Mildred, will you go down to the lake?" he asked, offering his arm.

She half arose. A sudden inspiration seemed to urge her to reveal her difficulty; her eyes again fell on the ring sparkling on Colonel Sutherland's finger: but her fear, her terror of her husband's contempt, and the deep misgiving that, unlike Mrs. St. Priest's remedy to stimulate *un amour usé*, the reality and certainty of her act would still more alienate that esteem which she was now above everything eager to cultivate, prevailed. Yielding, therefore, to this false gloss, she sat down again,—inwardly determining, *coute qui coute*, to extricate herself from the predicament, and afterwards never more to hold the slightest communication with the unscrupulous Colonel Sutherland.

"I will join you in a few minutes. The sun is at present so intense, I feel that its glare on the water would be perfectly overpowering; but do not let me detain you," replied she, at length, with some confusion of manner.

The serious reproving look bent upon her by the earl, as he immediately withdrew and walked away with Lady Emily, quite chased all kindly feeling from Lady Alresford's heart; she turned indignantly towards her companion.

"Colonel Sutherland, you have no right to that ring, which you have presumed most unwarrantably to wear! It is mine, and I insist that it is restored to me instantly!" exclaimed she, in a tone of haughty decision.

"I have no right to it? You insist, Lady Alresford?"

"Yes, I insist! You never had any right to it, and consequently have none now," rejoined Mildred, angrily.

"What! Did you not give it to me?"

"Never!"

"Lady Alresford, is it so? Is it possible you have banished from your memory—that you intend to feign ignorance of all that has passed between us? Do you quite discard all remembrance of those happy moments during which you suffered me to appropriate this ring?" replied Colonel Sutherland, looking full in her face, while a smile of hope, and incredulity curled his handsome lip.

"I remember well the period to which you allude. I was then heedless and unsuspicious, and laughed, and speedily forgot your presumption. Now, its audacity stands fully revealed; and therefore, if you set the slightest value on my future good opinion, give me back that ring," rejoined Mildred, firmly.

"Audacity! This is indeed a strange hard word to utter, Lady Alresford. But I know the arrival of the Earl of Alresford made all the difference: had his lordship delayed his return home a few weeks longer, words such as those you

have just now used would have had small significance between us."

"I do not understand your insinuation, Colonel Sutherland."

"There is such a thing as a *mariage de convenance*, as well as a *mariage de cœur*!" replied the colonel, coldly, for he perceived her excitement. "Will you walk, Lady Alresford? All the people are gone; and perhaps our colloquy may be remarked."

"I shall not stoop to penetrate your meaning, Colonel Sutherland. Restore my ring, and then leave me, and offer your attentions where they are acceptable, and where they are due!" said Mildred, peremptorily; moving away, however, a few steps with the colonel: for the same thought occurred to her, that their *tête-à-tête* might be observed.

"No, Lady Alresford; not even your positive commands shall compel me to give up this sole precious relic of the days you smiled upon me: for that you did smile upon me you cannot deny. Answer me, Mildred: how did you feel towards him now your husband at the time of your marriage?"

Lady Alresford paused; the vivid colour glowed in her cheek.

"I will not. I will answer nothing," replied she, resentfully.

"No; for it were vain to deny you loved me when you gave your hand to another: ay, worse than vain; for your own lips revealed your repugnance, if not positive hatred, of your betrothed."

"I never, never loved you! No, never!" exclaimed Mildred, vehemently; "and what you dare assert I admitted is false: yes, false and plausible, as I have at last found you out to be, Colonel Sutherland."

"What, Mildred! do you mean to assert that our whole past connection has been a series of heartless coquetry on your part? that no responsive chord echoed within to what your lips, your eyes, your manner, everything proclaimed? Could I have believed this, your severe reproofs at Fernly would, indeed, have fallen scathless to the ground. I, at least, have sincerity on my side; for I worship the very ground on which you tread, Mildred. Oh! say I was not always indifferent to you, and that at least once your precious affection was mine," said he, in a voice of deep agitation.

"Never! Never, under any circumstances, after I learned your engagement, would I have been yours. Oh! why will you persist in being the bane of my existence? For shame, Colonel Sutherland! consider the gross indelicacy of your present conduct towards Miss Conway. This, almost in the very presence of your betrothed wife!" exclaimed Mildred, rapidly, with burning cheek.

"Miss Conway! What care I for a hundred Maude Conways? I worship you only, Mildred."

"To what can I appeal? Colonel Sutherland, if you value my happiness, give me back that ring," said she, at length, while her lips became very white.

"Your happiness depends on its possession? I cannot believe it, Mildred! But it is in vain you entreat: never will I consent to part with this prized bauble!" replied the colonel, after a pause; pressing the ring to his lips, and again bending his passionate gaze on her agitated face.

"I shall appeal, then, to Lord Alresford," replied she, coldly and haughtily.

"No, Mildred, you will not; because you dare not. You fear your husband's anger," persisted Colonel Sutherland, without noticing her indignant gestures. "If you mutually loved and trusted one another, would you have evinced such agitation about this trifle? Would you have given me the opportunity of speaking to you as I have done? If there were no reserve between you, would it have materially signified whether this ring remained in my possession, or in your own?"

All this was true,—undeniable. Mildred wept. Colonel Sutherland felt her arm tremble nervously.

"Mildred," at length said he, "I will not tyrannise over you: nor shall you ever think of me as the bane of your existence. I will restore this ring on one condition."

"Name it!" exclaimed she, hurriedly raising her eyes, humid with tears, to his face.

"My relation, Mrs. St. Priest, gives a *soirée*—a concert, or something of the kind, the day after to-morrow. She wishes for the honour of receiving Lord Alresford and yourself. The earl, most probably, will disdain her invitation. Promise me you will come, and the ring then shall be yours."

"Without my husband? Impossible!"

"This must be for you to consider, Lady Alresford. Perhaps the earl, at your solicitation, may honour Ada with his company," replied the colonel, in a tone slightly taunting.

Mildred pressed her hand tightly across her brow.

"I will come!" said she at length, firmly, with a sigh.

A smile of triumph flitted across Colonel Sutherland's face. He turned nonchalantly away, as Lady Alresford abruptly dropped his arm, and joined Mrs. Otway, who was strolling alone on the lawn.

Meanwhile, Mr. Turville seemed to hang on the footsteps of his beautiful cousin. Lady Catherine, however, studiously avoided his silent homage. An air of weary restraint and languor sat on her brow, and she sighed as she gazed on the

gay scene around, for to a spirit sad and ill at ease, there is nothing so overwhelmingly depressing as the sounds of mirth and merriment. Vainly did the Lady Catherine strive to listen, with an air of patient interest, to the animated nothings of the happy groups gathered on the margin of the water, until at length her desire for solitude could no longer be repressed; and rising she quietly stole away, unperceived by all save one vigilant eye, and turned into a narrow path, shadowed on either side by lofty plantations, leading by a detour of some half mile, through the grounds of Nethercote to the small hamlet adjoining.

Lady Catherine's heart was very sad, for the day, in its still, sublime beauty, reminded her of one—that most momentous one in her life—which she spent in the little, obscure city of Narbonne. The sun shone with the same steadfast intensity, and its rays, pouring through the bright semi-transparent foliage, threw a beautiful, softened light around; while myriads of insects buzzed joyously amid the tangled thickets, or flitted from one tender floweret to another; performing their part in that universal homage due from all His creatures to the great Giver and Creator of the glories of nature, which *man*, who benefits most, alone ungratefully refuses. Lady Catherine walked on musing, and slowly, until she came to a little green knoll, pleasantly shaded by a clump of beech trees, when, overpowered by the heat of the day, she threw herself down on the soft turf. In a few minutes a quick step aroused her from her reverie, and soon her cousin, Mr. Turville, stood beside her.

"Catherine, what dreadfully low spirits you are in to-day! What can be the matter?" replied he, looking anxiously on her face.

"Am I, Charles? Pray, do not think so; it seems so ungrateful after all the beautiful things you have provided for our entertainment," replied she, smiling.

"You do not deny the charge; this is well. Catherine, tell me what it is all about?" replied he, fixing his large, serious eyes anxiously upon her.

"Upon my word, I never met anybody half so inquisitive as you are become! Now, do you believe it possible that a woman can account for every fleeting emotion which produces a temporary fit of depression?" rejoined Lady Catherine, trying to laugh off her embarrassment.

"This will not do, Catherine; this trifling does not deceive me! You are not happy: there is something on your spirits; and this I have long perceived. Will you not trust me, dear cousin?" and Mr. Turville took the little soft hand which rested on the mossy bank.

"Can you wonder, Charles, if my spirits are not as good as

they should be at my age? Remember the anxiety I have suffered during the last four years," said Lady Catherine, struggling with her emotion.

"I understand, Catherine, to what you allude," promptly rejoined Mr. Turville, glancing at her deep mourning gown. "But it is not this sorrow which quenches your spirit: for, for your father you mourn as one having hope; but what is this deep gloom which causes you, so richly blessed, to turn with disgust from everything? that prompts you to hail solitude and seclusion? Tell me, dear Catherine!"

There was something in the deep earnest pathos of his voice—something in its tremulous softness, which thrilled through her. How sweet is human sympathy! At the first few words that ever touched on the secret source of her sorrow, Lady Catherine's overcharged spirit yielded, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

She had so long struggled with her silent grief.

"Catherine, tell me this secret! I have a right to hear it; for I love you madly,—passionately! Speak, Catherine! I cannot live without you! Tell me I have no rival to dread!" exclaimed Mr. Turville, seizing her hands, and drawing her impetuously towards him.

She shuddered. Her beautiful features seemed rigid with emotion as she tore her hands from his grasp.

"Charles, Charles! forbear, I beseech you!" were the only words which burst from her trembling lips.

"What does this mean, Catherine? Surely, surely not that those dear lips are about to pronounce a doom, an hereafter, I shudder to realise! Think again, dear Catherine. I love you beyond the power of expression! Give me hope—even the very faintest glimmer," said he, passionately, kissing her hands.

"What shall I say?" exclaimed Lady Catherine, at length, raising her eyes, swimming in tears, to the agitated face of her cousin. "Charles, hate me—yet forgive me, that, while absorbed in my own selfish sorrows, until lately, I have been blind to your love. I have lured you daily into my society without once reflecting what might be the result. Will you forgive me?—will you speak to me more, when I tell you I can never, never be yours?"

"Catherine, you cannot be in earnest! Oh, recall your words. Say, my Catherine,—say it is not so!" and Mr. Turville stooped, and pressed his lips to her throbbing brow.

"I have said. Oh, Charles, tell me I have not made you very, very miserable."

"Miserable! Catherine, miserable is too feeble a word to express my feelings. Is there, indeed, no hope for me?" replied he, in a voice of deep anguish.

She bowed her head on her fair hands, and spoke not, for deep sobs heaved her bosom. All at once she sprang to her feet with a start, at the sound of a rustling, and slight crashing of boughs in an adjoining spinny.

"What was that, Charles? What stirred yonder?"

"Probably, only a dog belonging to one of the keepers on their rounds. You need not be alarmed. Sit down again, Catherine."

She sat down. Her bonnet, in her agitation, had fallen to the ground; and her black hair, bound in tight shining bands around her head revealed the perfect contour of her face and throat. Mr. Turville's eyes rested mournfully upon her.

"Answer me one question, Catherine. Do you love another?" asked he, at length.

She bent her head in silence. An exclamation of deep pain burst from Mr. Turville's lips.

"May I ask more, Catherine? Though the vision of bliss, which I thought might empower me to read your heart is gone — bitterly dissipated, remember, I am your nearest kinsman."

"No; you must not ask more. Some day you shall hear all — all!"

"Why not now?" persisted Mr. Turville, whose own straightforward disposition could not brook the semblance of mystery. "Why not now, Catherine? Am I right in suspecting, that the man who has for ever robbed me of peace, is Mr. Randolph?" and he turned his clear eyes inquiringly on her face.

"Charles, ask me not," replied Lady Catherine, hastily rising, and tying on her bonnet. "Nay, dear cousin, say not another word. I cannot tell you. Come, let us join your guests again," continued she, walking forwards.

Mr. Turville still looked gloomy and dissatisfied.

"Catherine, have you confided in Lord Alresford?"

"No," replied she, briefly.

"Distrust any man who enforces upon you this silence. Harken, dearest Catherine; what can his motive for binding you to secrecy be, but that all cannot be right; and he fears the disapprobation, or perhaps just chastisement, of your guardian, and nearest relative —"

"Let us change the subject, Charles," said Lady Catherine, firmly. "I cannot at present explain anything to you."

Mr. Turville silently acquiesced, and they walked on side by side.

"I wish all these people were gone!" exclaimed he, as they presently again came upon the gaily attired, happy-looking groups. "Catherine, will you let me row you, and then we

may enjoy a few minutes longer immunity from their nonsense?"

"No, Charles, better not. Let us not prolong an interview so painful. I will go and walk with Mrs. Otway."

"Who then shall I ask, Catherine, to accompany me? Let it be some one who will not torment me with frivolous *exigeance*. I am in no mood to bear it."

"Ask Maude Conway!" replied Lady Catherine, hastily withdrawing her arm from her cousin's, and walking away.

"Edward tells me, Lady Alresford, that you will confer upon me the honour and pleasure of accepting my invitation for Friday next. I grieve to say I have been less successful with the earl, who I find unfortunately presides at a public dinner at Avington on that day. Perhaps, however, you may prevail upon his lordship to join us later in the evening," said Mrs. St. Priest, in her blindest tones, as Mildred stood by her husband's side in the hall, before entering her carriage to drive homewards.

"Thank you; you are very kind," replied Mildred, shaking hands with Mrs. St. Priest, as the earl immediately took her arm and hurried her to the carriage.

And now we must request the indulgent reader to accompany us in a kind of Asmodeus-like expedition to the respective homes of our heroine and her would-be hostess, Mrs. St. Priest.

We will proceed then at once to Mon-Bijou, and enter, without further preamble, the widow's fragrant boudoir, where she is seated on a low chair inhaling the perfume of a bunch of orange flowers rifled from the Nethercote conservatory. The hour is between ten and eleven; the tapers over the fireplace are lighted, but the open windows still admit the soft August twilight. By one of the windows stands Colonel Sutherland. Presently Mrs. St. Priest arose and went towards him, and stood silently for some time leaning against the window frame, watching the undulations of the snowy petals she remorselessly severed from her bouquet, as they fell, nestling amid the foliage of the laurels underneath; occasionally, also, stealing a sly glance at the cloudy countenance of her companion, who seemed absorbed in reverie.

"Edward, your device of the ring appears to have worked marvels," said she, at length, in her low silvery tones, still bending out of the window.

"Yes, it was a lucky thought. Is she not beautiful, Ada?"

"Peerlessly! Will she come on Friday, think you?"

"Yes; for I see she attaches immense importance to the possession of this ring. Ada, I cannot sufficiently express my admiration of your skill."

"*Certes*, Edward, the little I have done for you is not worth even thanks at present. Have you courage to proceed? Shall we have the concert and *tableau* on Friday?" said Mrs. St. Priest, raising her eyes to the colonel's, and laying her hand lightly on his arm.

"Courage! courage to make Mildred Effingham mine? Ada, you jest; or rather you know not how madly I love!" exclaimed Colonel Sutherland, fixing his eyes almost fiercely on her face, while his cheek flushed.

"But does she love you? Would she abandon all to follow you?" asked Mrs. St. Priest, doubtingly.

"She did love me. A sense of duty snatched her from me—but pique shall give her back to my arms. Mildred Effingham married intending to act righteously towards her husband—some fatal obstacle interposes. Ada, I tell you there is disunion between them. Gradually widen the breach until it becomes irreparable, and she is mine!" cried Colonel Sutherland, vehemently.

"I understand," said Mrs. St. Priest slowly, while a visible shudder passed over her, hardened in intrigue as she was.

There was a few moments of silence.

"Suppose she should reveal all to this grandioso of a husband of hers, Edward?" at length resumed she.

"Little fear of that," replied Colonel Sutherland, while a smile of contempt hovered on his well cut lip.

"Why not? What should prevent her?"

"Irresolution of character—that sweet woman's weakness—which will make her mine, despite her struggles for freedom."

"On Friday, then, we shall really witness *les Triomphes de l'Amour*, Edward, and our *tableau* will be most appropriately named; for if it be as you say, she will come, and alone. If not I consider it a *parti perdu*, and you had better patch up a peace with Maude Conway."

The colonel made no reply. Another pause ensued.

"I wonder what that little precious secret is which poisons Mildred Effingham's domestic happiness? What would I not sacrifice to be put in possession of it?" exclaimed the colonel, moodily.

Mrs. St. Priest's silver laughter rang round clear as a bell.

"And what if I give you this key to Mildred Alresford's heart?" said she, lightly.

"Can you do it, Ada?" rejoined the colonel, impetuously

seizing her hands. "I would sacrifice all I possess to obtain it!"

"*Doucement, mon cher Edouard. All! c'est de trop!*" replied the widow, with a bland smile; for the green fields of Cotgrove presented themselves vividly to her imagination. A few words will put you *au fait* as to the position of our noble neighbours at Amesbury. Lady Alresford is annoyed and jealous *à faire peur*, at the intimacy and strict friendship between her husband and the Lady Catherine Neville. Lord Alresford on his side is indignant, and *ombrageux*, at his wife's former *liaison* with you. Neither will condescend to explain, and so they both misunderstand each other's motives and actions. However, I give you one word of advice, Edward—be speedy in your manœuvres, or I would not give much for your chance of success, if my lord should one day take it into his head to make love in earnest to his beautiful wife."

"My adorable Ada, your tact is incomparable; I see it all!" exclaimed the colonel, rapturously kissing the two white hands he still held tightly clasped within his own.

"I shall leave you to your meditations now, Edward, which I certainly take to myself the credit of having enlivened. Do not, however, be too positive of the success of '*les triomphes de l'amour*,'" said Mrs. St. Priest, laughing and shutting down the window. "Good night.—Pray take care not to set the house on fire in your deep musings on love and conquest, I beseech you, Edward," said Mrs. St. Priest, as she closed the door of the boudoir.

It was about half an hour after her return from Nethercote, that Lady Alresford, divested of her gay attire, and wrapped in a loose muslin *peignoir*, reposed on a sofa in her sitting-room. She had taken leave of her husband under the plea of fatigue, and now lay revolving all the events of the day. Everything around her was so still, so calm, that almost the throbings of her own perplexed heart might be heard. The pendule over the chimney-piece ticked—that slow monotonous warning of the flight of time, almost solemn as it steals on the ear, amid the shades and silence of evening—and Mildred closed her eyes, and thought of her own dear home, cheered by her parents and Helen's love, and she almost wept as she contrasted her present desolate loneliness, with *him* whose affection she had at length learned to prize as the dearest and most precious boon of earth.

Her reverie was at length broken by a rap at the door. Thinking the intruder could only be Aglaë, she somewhat im-

patiently bade her enter. The door immediately opened and to her amazement Lord Alresford stood before her. It was the first time he had sought admittance at so late an hour.

"Do not disturb yourself, Mildred," said he, restraining her from rising, as her first impulse prompted; then taking a chair he seated himself beside her.

The colour flitted and deepened on Mildred's cheek. What could be the purport of his visit? She felt he had a right to complain of her conduct: but had she then, indeed, succeeded in forcing words of complaint at her coldness from his lips?

"Mildred, you are quite well aware of my determination never to suffer misapprehension of any kind to grow between us, which explanation would dissipate," said he, gravely, fixing his eyes penetratingly on hers. "Did you know that you were to meet Colonel Sutherland at Nethercote, to-day?"

"No, I did not know that we were to meet him, nor even that he was expected in this neighbourhood," replied Mildred, while her colour rose.

"I hoped and trusted so, remembering your solemn promise never more voluntarily to subject yourself to the advances of that unprincipled man. Yet, Lady Alresford, your manner towards Colonel Sutherland to-day in public was far from meeting with my approbation—far from what it ought to have been, had you duly considered your own honour, and his whose name you bear. Do not agitate yourself, Mildred. I intend not to reproach you, but still, when I hear you forming engagements with Mrs. St. Priest, without even looking for the sanction of your husband's presence, my course of action is clear: I should be unworthy the confidence your parents reposed in me, did I not now peremptorily prohibit all further intercourse with Colonel Sutherland, and with Mrs. St. Priest, whilst he is her guest."

The blood mounted to Mildred's brow.

"Peremptorily forbid! This from you, Lord Alresford?" said she, half rising from the sofa.

"And more than this, Lady Alresford; I feel myself unhappily compelled to insist, that she who calls herself my wife shall not, on any future occasion, by similar levity of manner, permit the breath of slander to sully her reputation!" said the earl, in tones unmoved.

"Lord Alresford, what right have you to use such language to me? How have I deserved it?" asked Mildred, haughtily.

"You shall be your own judge, Lady Alresford. Mind, I heard nothing: I only observed what everyone present might, and doubtless did, remark. Now, dare you repeat to me your conversation with Colonel Sutherland this day?"

She was silent; her eyes fell under the clear open gaze bent upon her.

"You cannot, Mildred! Am I, then, wrong to defend your inexperience against our mutual enemy? Remember the bitter past which casts its shadow over us now. Tell me you will avoid this man: nay, give me your solemn promise!" said the earl, with emotion, bending over her.

But the archtempter, in the shape of Mrs. St. Priest, was busy at Mildred's heart. A little more, she thought, and the earl would be at her feet; perhaps even now, he was experiencing some small degree of the anguish which tortured her whenever the image of Lady Catherine arose.

"But, my lord, you cannot surely mean to ask me to forfeit the promise I gave to Mrs. St. Priest? Anything but this. I have given my word," said she, at length, with a smile.

"After what I have just said, Mildred, I confess I did not expect this observation," replied the earl, in a voice of cold displeasure.

"What can you fear? or rather, why cannot you accompany me, Lord Alresford? If I excuse myself, all the world will say you hold your wife in tutelage," said Mildred, nonchalantly, twining one of her shining ringlets over her finger.

"Mildred, since you have borne my name, have I ever, directly or indirectly, sought to exercise the least authority, or to control your inclinations? I have left you in all things mistress of your actions, save in this one instance. If you think you owe me thanks for my forbearance, reward it by promising to avoid any intimacy with Mrs. St. Priest. Is this too much to ask from you, dear Mildred?" said the earl, taking her hand kindly.

She trembled: never before had word of entreaty fallen from her husband's lips. Her small hand lay in his—every pulse throbbed violently—but the ring, the possession of which Colonel Sutherland retained, rose between her and what her conscience suggested. She dare not confess the full extent of her past faithlessness to him who would as yet, she believed, view her conduct only through the medium of stern propriety. Had the earl's words been those of love, perhaps Mildred would have thrown herself on his bosom, and asked even the solution of her miserable doubts. Could she but regain the memorial of her past infidelity, she imagined she could now meet him on more equal ground. Her resolution, therefore, was speedily taken. Poor Mildred! she forgot, in the struggles of her perplexed heart, the truth of the pithy, plain-spoken old proverb—"Hell is paved with good resolutions!"

"Do not let us discuss the subject any more at present, my lord. When Friday arrives, I dare say we shall be able to solve the disputed point to our satisfaction; so let us adjourn the debate until then."

And Mildred averted her eyes to avoid the sight of her husband's impending indignation.

"This trifling is unworthy of you, Lady Alresford. It is unjustifiable,—unprincipled! As long as you remain under my roof, you shall not heedlessly rush on your destruction. Listen, therefore, Mildred! Though I will not harshly lay my positive commands on you to refrain from this visit, I think I have expressed my sentiments plainly enough for you to hesitate on the propriety of setting them at naught!" exclaimed Lord Alresford indignantly, rising and approaching the door.

She saw she had gone too far. She lay motionless on the sofa—her bosom palpitating, her black hair and the crimson glow on her cheek in beautiful contrast with the snowy muslin of her wrapper. She raised her eyes, and caught the parting glance of deep sorrow and disappointment imprinted on her husband's noble features. In another moment, she would have been at his feet—in his arms—but he was gone!

CHAPTER XX.

AN ECCENTRIC VISITOR.

MEANWHILE, Lady Catherine's drive from Mr. Turville's fête homewards was a refreshing though a silent one; for Mrs. Otway, wearied with the fatigue and excitement of the day, comfortably composed herself to sleep in the corner of the carriage. After her arrival at Wardour, Lady Catherine lingered a few moments in the porch, and on entering the house remarked that Hudson, the old butler, stood with the door of the sitting-room in his hand, awaiting her with a face of the most serious importance.

"During your absence, my lady, a gentleman has been here to call upon your ladyship," said he, carefully closing the door, and approaching his young mistress with a most mysterious air.

"Very well, Hudson. The gentleman, probably, left his card?" replied Lady Catherine, much amused at her old servant's manner.

"No, my lady, he did not."

"Then, perhaps, you can tell me his name."

"No, Lady Catherine, I never to my knowledge saw the gentleman before; but he seemed so queer and odd, that I felt quite thankful your ladyship was not at home."

"How do you mean, Hudson? Did he not leave a message? What did the gentleman say for himself?" asked Mrs. Otway, approaching.

"Why, you see, Madam, it was just this,"—said Hudson, relieved from his embarrassment by the old lady's kind smile. "About half-past four o'clock the gentleman called, and asked to see her ladyship. I told him Lady Catherine was from home; but instead of leaving his card, and going away as I expected, he walked straight past me into this room. Of course I followed, and told him as civilly as I could, that Lady Catherine was gone to the grand fête at Nethercote, and would not be home until late; but he kept opening the books, one after another, and looked so wild-like that I felt afraid to say much, especially as I thought from his free manners he might possibly be one of her ladyship's foreign acquaintance. Well, Madam, after a bit, he desired me to shut the door and leave the room. As I thought it best not to irritate the gentleman, I did as he told me; taking good care, however, to stand outside in the hall. Presently, Madam, I heard him open that door opposite, into the little west parlour; and then, after a time, he began pacing up and down as if he was walking for a wager. Your ladyship need not be alarmed: I assure you, he went away quietly enough at last," said the old man, perceiving the pallor which gradually overspread his young mistress's countenance.

"Very extraordinary conduct, indeed, Hudson. What was the gentleman like?" asked Mrs. Otway, darting a sharp glance at Lady Catherine.

"Why, Madam, I am sure that is difficult to say, his cloak came so high round his face. He was tall and foreign-looking. He appeared very much put about at not seeing Lady Catherine."

"Are you quite sure he left no message? Nothing?" broke from Lady Catherine's trembling lips.

"I was going to tell your ladyship. After the gentleman had been shut up for above an hour, I took the liberty of going in to ask whether he would take any refreshment, when I found him seated exactly where your ladyship sits now; and it appears, Madam, he had been writing something all this time to her ladyship, which he left on the table in the parlour yonder, and desired me nohow, on no account to touch, but to leave exactly where he had put it until her ladyship returned. He then took his hat and rushed out of the house, Madam, and I just got to the door in time to see him turn towards the shrubby walks."

The old servant paused, to observe the effect of his narrative on the two ladies. Lady Catherine's face was averted.

"You may go now, Hudson. I cannot imagine who this

gentleman is ; but I dare say if he has left a letter for your mistress, it will be found all right," said Mrs. Otway, hastily.

"The paper is on the table yonder, Mrs. Otway : I suffered no one to enter the room, the gentleman's orders were so very strict. I wish also to say that your ladyship need not be alarmed, for I have caused the gardens to be searched, and no one is lurking about ; and everything is as you left it, both in this room and the next," said Hudson, as with a countenance much lightened he hastened away.

Lady Catherine sat with her face buried in her hands.

"Catherine, my dear !" said Mrs. Otway, approaching, and laying her hand, trembling with excitement, on her pupil's shoulder.

Lady Catherine raised her head ; her cheeks, lips and brow were colourless as the whitest marble. Mrs. Otway hastily drew a smelling-bottle from her pocket.

"This gentleman can only be Frederic Randolph. Will you not be pleased to hear of him, my dear ?" said the good lady, as cheerily as she could command her voice.

Lady Catherine arose, hastily passed her, and entered the small parlour. A large, unfinished picture stood on an easel near the window ; and on the table upon which lay her brushes and palette, was a note addressed to her. She hurriedly tore it open ; one moment devoted to its perusal—and with a smothered cry of grief, she sank to the ground, fainting.

"God bless my soul ! What is to be done now ? Hudson ! Wilmot !" exclaimed Mrs. Otway, in an agony of alarm, wildly ringing all the bells in the two rooms.

To increase her dismay, in the fall Lady Catherine's head struck against the sharp corner of a chair, and blood was slowly streaming down her cheek from a slight cut on the temple. Mrs. Otway knelt down, and stanchd the blood with her handkerchief.

"It's Hudson's and my opinion, Mrs. Otway, that this country does not suit our dear young lady. Excuse me, Madam, but I think you ought to advise her to go back to Italy. It's killing her by inches !" exclaimed Wilmot, in desperation, as she lifted her young mistress from the ground to the sofa.

"Catherine, my dear child, are you better ? Dear me, I think I had better despatch a messenger for Lord Alresford," said Mrs. Otway, as she ineffectually tried to draw the letter from Lady Catherine's hand.

"Neither Lord Alresford, nor anybody else, will see my lady to-night, Mrs. Otway," replied Wilmot, doggedly.

"Well, perhaps you are right, Wilmot ; it would only agitate her," replied the old lady, who herself shook like an aspen leaf, sitting down by the side of the couch.

Presently the palest colour stole over Lady Catherine's face ;

her lips moved convulsively, and she half opened her eyes, but closed them again immediately, until at length large tears slowly trickled down her cheeks.

"She will be better now : but Mrs. Otway, her ladyship is not in a fit state to bear any agitating conversation ; therefore, with your permission, I shall not leave her again to-night," said Wilmot, in resolute tones ; and she carried her point, and watched until daybreak by the side of her young mistress with the care and vigilance of a mother : for Wilmot was an old faithful servant, and had lived with Lady Catherine from her childhood.

The few lines which had produced Lady Catherine's agitation were as follows :—

"Catherine ! To-day I have seen the burning kiss of love imprinted by other lips than mine on the brow of her who swore to be my own for ever ! Can you imagine the anguish which now supplants the anticipated rapture of my meeting with one whose love to me was paradise ? My Catherine ! have you forgotten the vows softly breathed in the mystic twilight of San Carlo of Narbonne ? or, rather, in your proud English home do you scorn and loathe the bond which unites you to one poor, unknown, obscure ? If you wish to see me, dismiss from your presence him who arrogantly 'aspires to what is mine solely. Oh, Catherine, the keen anguish of finding you faithless—how shall even this sacrifice assuage its pangs ? My Catherine ! mine still by the holiest and most endearing of ties,—Farewell !

"F. R."

The following morning, deaf to Wilmot's exhortations, Lady Catherine persisted in rising early, and pale and *défaite*, Mrs. Otway, to her infinite consternation, found her seated in the breakfast-room. Little was said on either side, and as soon as the meal was despatched, Mrs. Otway retired to the privacy of her own room to meditate on the very desperate resolution that suggested itself to her mind to acquaint Lord Alresford with the events which threatened, in her opinion, the total overthrow of the happiness of her beloved pupil.

As for Lady Catherine, she paced up and down : wandering from the room on to the terrace, and from the terrace back to the room. She did not weep : no tear fell to quench the burning anxiety which consumed her. She moved, but her spirit was insensible to all external objects, save those which ministered to her sorrow. She took a melancholy pleasure in following Mr. Randolph's footsteps round the room : she touched everything that fancy suggested he had touched : and mechanically, her fingers turned the leaves of the books he

had opened. She approached the table on which lay her painting materials; she started; the colours on the palette were smeared, and the brushes scattered in disorder around. She stood before her picture, and tears at length swelled in her eyes as she recognised those masterly touches which imparted almost a living glow to the fair Sicilian landscape. Had he stood before it, and mused on the sunny passages which embellished their brief sojourn there? Could he then deem her unfaithful, and doom her again to the anguish of suspense—to the bitterness of desertion?

Lady Catherine still stood before her easel mute, absorbed, when she heard a light bounding step on the terrace, then in the adjoining apartment, and the next moment Maude Conway entered hastily; her sweet good-humoured face radiant with smiles, and her manner so very much at variance with her usual pensive, sedate deportment, that her friend, had she been less abstracted, must have been assured some event of more than ordinary interest had occurred. Maude, however, paused abruptly as her eyes fell on Lady Catherine's pallid face: her smiles vanished as she hastened towards her.

"Good Heavens, Catherine! what is the matter? what has happened to you?" exclaimed she in a voice of alarm, perceiving the gash on Lady Catherine's forehead, which was only half concealed by the glossy band of hair drawn across.

"Don't be alarmed, Maude; it is only a mere scratch. After I returned home last night, I did not feel very well, and fainted, and my forehead struck against the corner of a chair," replied Lady Catherine hastily, with visible effort, passing her fingers slowly over the wound.

"But what made you faint, Catherine?" asked Maude, not at all satisfied by her friend's hasty explanation.

Lady Catherine sat down on the sofa.

"I believe I have been very nervous and unwell for some time past, Maude."

"But if nothing extraordinary besides, dear Catherine, has combined to make you look so wretchedly ill this morning, I shall begin to be seriously alarmed about your health. What does Mrs. Otway say?" asked Maude gently, seating herself by Lady Catherine's side.

"Oh, of course, the slightest thing alarms her terribly. But I am better. Have patience with me, dearest Maude. Time will either bring freedom from pain, or the best of cures," replied Lady Catherine, with a sad smile.

"I see how it is, Catherine. It is not alone bodily indisposition which robs you of health, but depression of spirits. You have not yet learned that hard lesson which teaches to smile, while the heart is breaking," said Maude, sorrowfully.

"Maude, you are right; there is nothing worth living for in

this world. Disappointment and sorrow meet at every turn in one's destiny."

"And yet you have hope—bright hope, Catherine. If ever eyes beamed love and admiration, those of Charles Turville do on you," said Maude, gently.

A flush suffused Lady Catherine's brow. She half started from the sofa—a feeling of keen apprehension took possession of her senses.

"Maude, Maude! say not this, I beseech you. Charles Turville is nothing—can never be anything to me!"

For one brief moment Lady Normanton's malicious assertion flashed across Miss Conway's mind. Could it be that her friend's health suffered from disappointment at her guardian's marriage?

"Poor Charles Turville, how bitter will be his disappointment, Catherine!" said Maude, with a sigh.

"The worst is over, Maude. He proposed to me yesterday, and I refused him."

"Catherine, are you sure—very sure, you know your own heart? You always appeared to me to take such delight in each other's society. Do nothing hastily, dear Catherine; you cannot imagine the misery it may cost you afterwards," said Maude, very earnestly.

"I love and admire my cousin more than anybody in the world, save Lord Alresford: and one other, Maude, whom I may not even name to you. Few things could now bring such joy to me as to learn that Charles was happy, and had met with some one worthy of his good and true heart."

Miss Conway's eyes turned with a pitying expression on her friend.

"Take courage, dear Catherine! the heart recovers itself; and the affections, though once cruelly crushed, are not so for ever. 'Tis a stern discipline; but I have endured it, and conquered," said she, affectionately.

There was something in Miss Conway's tone which made Lady Catherine turn and look earnestly in her face.

"Have you seen Colonel Sutherland this morning, Maude?" asked she, at length.

"He called at Moreton; but of course, after his cruel neglect yesterday, I refused to see him," rejoined she, calmly.

"What course do you mean to pursue, then, Maude? I fear you will never be happy with so frivolous a being; and how he ever succeeded in attracting your affection has always been a mystery to me; but this world is made up of contrarieties."

"I have written this morning to dissolve our engagement."

"Maude!"

"I felt that Edward Sutherland no longer possessed my esteem and confidence, therefore it was my bounden duty not

to become his wife ; so I acted accordingly," replied Miss Conway, while tears shone in her clear, blue eyes.

"Has Colonel Sutherland ever explained his mysterious *liaison* with Lady Alresford?"

"Yes. I do not attach the slightest culpability to her, as far as I am concerned. Lady Alresford was more sinned against than sinning. Colonel Sutherland kept her in complete ignorance of his engagement ; but the moment she discovered it, she insisted that the whole affair should be told to me."

"Did you observe his manner to her yesterday? Lord Alresford, I thought, looked much annoyed. Poor Mildred, how she must have suffered ! I wish she would let me be her friend," said Lady Catherine, musingly.

"Lady Alresford wants resolution of character," rejoined Maude, very gravely.

There was a pause. Lady Catherine arose and leant out of the open window.

"Maude," at length said she, "I cannot understand you. How can you look, and talk so calmly, after having discarded the man whom a few days ago you regarded as your affianced husband? Did it cost you no pang?"

"Many, many, Catherine ; but in the midst of my trouble this morning, a letter arrived announcing the arrival of dear Normanton in England. Do you remember him at all, Catherine?"

"As a boy only ; now, of course, I should not recognise him. But, dear Maude, I most sincerely congratulate you. I suppose you expect him at Moreton immediately."

"No, indeed ! business unfortunately detains him in London, and then he will be obliged to go down to Witham. Normanton, however, has written to ask me to accompany him there," said Maude, her eyes sparkling with pleasure.

"But do not Lady Normanton and Isabella feel rather aggrieved at not seeing him?"

"Why, Normanton says he hopes to pay them a hasty visit in a few days. Mamma dreads the meeting, on account of her delicate nerves, and so is well content to defer it awhile ; and *entre nous*, Isabella exceedingly dislikes the thoughts of his return home to live with us. You will admire Normanton, I am sure, Catherine : he is such a fine, noble-looking fellow. You two are just the very people to fall in love," said she, laughing.

Lady Catherine shook her head, and turned languidly away towards the picture.

"It is very odd you never met abroad," continued Miss Conway ; "but I suppose my brother must have been at Athens during your residence in Italy. How much you have improved

your picture, Catherine! Really, you have worked immensely since I saw it, in spite of your accident."

"Shall we go out and walk, Maude? My head aches; and I think the air will revive me," said Lady Catherine, hastily putting down her palette, and turning away.

And they went: strolling for some hours in the fresh open air—Maude Conway dreaming of the delight of her anticipated meeting with her beloved brother—Lady Catherine passively listening to her animated expression of it—and thus they wandered on until the powerful rays of a midday sun drove them to seek refuge again in the house.

In the evening, Mr. Turville came to pay his accustomed visit: for somehow, since Lord Alresford's engagements prevented him making such frequent calls at Wardour Court, Mr. Turville had supplied his place; and the arrangement proved so pleasant a one, that insensibly it merged into custom. That it must now no longer be so, Lady Catherine's heart told her: her good, considerate cousin could not from henceforth be received on those terms of cordial familiarity which hitherto made their intercourse so delightful. She shrank from the ungrateful task of wounding his kind heart; but she felt it must be done: another glance at Mr. Randolph's note nerved her for the task. No wavering shook Lady Catherine's determination: she felt it a duty, and she resolved to act accordingly.

She was standing on the terrace at her favourite spot, commanding an extensive view over the park. Maude was seated in the drawing-room with Mrs. Otway, and Mr. Turville.

Soon the latter arose and joined her.

"Are you meditating about your late mysterious visitor, Catherine?" asked he, in his plain, abrupt manner; though not this time without a design of surprising her into some *éclaircissement*.

She was thinking of her ungracious task. She turned, however, and darted a scrutinising glance upon him.

"From whom did you hear anything about my visitor, Charles?"

"From Mrs. Otway. She only said, however, that some unknown called upon you during your absence from home yesterday. Do you still refuse me your confidence, Catherine?"

She turned mournfully aside.

"Have you thought again on our interview? Can you give me hope?" asked Mr. Turville, in tones of intense emotion.

"None, none! If you indeed care for my happiness, never ask me this question again, Charles!" exclaimed she; then suddenly seizing his arm as he was turning sorrowfully away, she added in a voice choked with tears, "I am going to ask you to do me a favour—the kindest and most brotherly you

can confer upon me. Yet, how shall I find words to give you so much pain, my good, kind cousin!" cried she, stopping abruptly.

"What is it, Catherine? Speak boldly—for if it be anything to promote your happiness or advantage, it cannot be painful to me," said Mr. Turville, taking her hand and raising it to his lips.

"Cannot you guess, Charles?"

"Nay, Catherine, I cannot read your heart, nor yet the imploring glance of those eyes. Remember, I am not in your confidence."

"I will tell you frankly, then, Charles. You must cease to make such frequent visits here. Dear cousin! turn not so reproachfully from me—happier times may come: and Charles, though unable to return your affection, I cannot tell you how I prize the expression of it. Can you forgive me,—and will you do what I ask?" said Lady Catherine, while tears rolled down her cheeks.

Mr. Turville turned away. For some minutes, neither spoke.

"Will you not say a word—one word to me, Charles?"

"This has been dictated to you, Catherine. What right has anybody to interfere between us? Who and what is this strange individual who appears to hold such sway over you?" at length he asked, moodily, almost angrily.

She answered not, but bowed her fair face on the marble balustrade.

"Is it your own will, Catherine? Do you yourself condemn me to this banishment from your presence?"

"It must be. You must leave me, Charles!" murmured she, without raising her head.

"You shall be obeyed, Catherine, cost me what it will!" replied Mr. Turville, hurrying from her side.

He passed hastily through the drawing-room; then, suddenly returning, stood before Maude Conway.

"Miss Conway, Catherine has forbidden me to visit her. Do you, therefore, watch over her; and I conjure you, as you love her and value her happiness, apply at once to Lord Alresford on any emergency: on—you know what I mean?"

"I will do so," replied Maude, emphatically.

He silently gave her his hand, and quitted the room

CHAPTER XXI.

PUTTING OFF THE EVIL DAY.

MILDRED, in the meantime, met her husband again, as if nothing had been amiss between them. Dissimulation, after all, is its own sharpest and heaviest scourge; and she who, unhappily, in an unguarded moment subjects herself to its anguish, little dreams of the keen suffering which this torturing foe to inward peace inflicts. To act one way, and to be thoroughly persuaded another, is of all things most miserable and humiliating. Truth, — and resolution to assert bright truth, are perhaps of all mental qualifications the most essential to happiness and self-respect. Half the misery in the world would be averted, did people possess more straightforward decision of purpose; “close with difficulties truthfully and honestly, and at once they vanish,” is a maxim which facts seldom refute.

Though Mildred’s disingenuous disposition had already heaped upon her a complication of misunderstandings, still her pride yet towered too high to suffer her husband to read her true regret for the past, or to show him that she considered his affection worth conciliating. Her fear of his censure, perhaps, equalled her love: she dreaded his contempt; and, vacillating between fear and hope, wanting resolution to ascertain her true standing in his estimation, she spent her days in this miserable state of incertitude. Judging his feelings by her own, she attributed his grave, serious deportment when they met, to excessive displeasure at her refusal to give the promise he had asked; and also to anger at Colonel Sutherland’s attentions. Never, she fancied, since their marriage had his indifference been so thoroughly manifested. Mildred meditated deeply and erroneously on this groundless fantasy; for like all who resolutely resist the small still voice of conscious rectitude, the tempter had been busy at her heart. She dare not confess to the earl that she had passively suffered another to appropriate his gift,—that the little circlet placed upon her finger when he acknowledged her his future bride, and which she had solemnly promised never to lay aside, until, from his betrothed, she became his own by a far dearer title. At any risk,—at any sacrifice, this must be recovered; and more also, a delusive voice whispered in her ear that her presence at Mrs. St. Priest’s *soirée* might produce a twofold good: notwithstanding, therefore, her husband’s positive injunctions, Mildred resolved to go; for

Mrs. St. Priest having craftily fixed on an evening when public duty compelled the earl's absence from Amesbury, left her at full liberty to follow her pleasure.

Lord Alresford ordered his carriage on the day in question at half-past five. A little before this time Mildred was seated in the drawing-room bending languidly over her embroidery frame, with thoughts little enviable and satisfactory clouding her brow. When the earl entered the room, she raised her eyes and gave one rapid glance at the handsome, manly figure of her husband, and then bent them down over her work.

"I am come to say farewell, Mildred, before setting off for Avington," said he, as he stooped, put his arm round her neck, and lightly kissed her brow; "I feel very sorry to leave you to a solitary evening. You do not appear to like Lady Catherine's society, Mildred, or I should propose to set you down at Wardour, and call for you again on my return home."

"Thank you; you will be absent for so short a time that I shall scarcely have leisure to feel solitary," replied Mildred with beating heart.

"I shall be at home about half-past ten; and mind, Mildred, I shall expect to find you in the library on my return," said the earl, with a smile as he closed the door.

Lady Alresford sat for some time motionless. Deep, agitating thoughts furrowed her fair young brow. Presently she hurriedly arose, and pushing the frame impatiently from her, proceeded to her boudoir, and rang the bell.

"I am going out this evening, Aglaë. I wish you to order the carriage for half-past eight. I shall wear blue satin and pearl ornaments," said she, decisively, as soon as her maid appeared, turning away into the garden, heedless of Aglaë's astonishment and characteristic comment.

And Mildred kept her word. At half-past eight she stepped into her carriage, and was speedily whirled to Mon-Bijou; setting off with the firmest intention to be back before her husband.

It would be difficult to give an analysis of Lady Alresford's feelings as she alighted at Mrs. St. Priest's door. She entered her saloon, however, which was filled with guests, with a demeanour firm and even haughty, and suffered herself to be led to a seat by her obsequious hostess, with an air and greater consciousness of her high rank than she had ever before assumed. Mrs. St. Priest's drawing-room glittered like Morgana's fairy halls; everything was on a small scale, but all in perfect taste. The lights, the tall mirrors, the gilding and marble, the dresses and jewels of her guests, sparkled and formed so brilliant a *tout ensemble*, that even Mildred's practised eye wandered complacently around. As Mrs. St. Priest's friends were invited to a concert, a splendid satin-wood pianoforte stood nearly in the centre of the room; a harp was

placed on one side, and on the other sundry inlaid music-desks and piles of new music. Every vacant corner and recess in the room was lined with flowers and shrubs, filling the air with freshness and fragrance.

Colonel Sutherland, with his handsome face and insinuating smile, stood leaning carelessly against the marble mantel-piece; and excepting one or two other county notabilities, who had paid their respects for a few brief minutes at Amesbury, Mildred, to her infinite joy, did not recognise a single personage.

Mrs. St. Priest, in a white satin dress, fantastically looped up with gold tassels and pink roses, did the honours with a pretty fluttering grace, that Mildred thought infinitely becoming to her. Now and then her bright blue eye wandered meaningly towards her handsome relative, and once or twice she paused in her dialogue with those around to watch his movements.

In a few minutes Colonel Sutherland approached Lady Alresford, who sat a little apart from the rest of the guests.

I have ventured to hope, Lady Alresford will accept this little peace-offering. Ah, Mildred, have you quite forgotten the day when you wore these flowers solely for me, because I loved them?" said he, presenting a splendid bouquet of scarlet japonicas.

The scene in her boudoir at the Priory flashed vividly upon Lady Alresford's recollection: she remembered Helen Campbell's emphatic warning. Ah! had she but attended to the counsel of that good, tried friend!

She took the bouquet from the colonel's hand, and glancing negligently over its glowing beauties, made some trifling remark, and tossed it carelessly on the sofa by her side.

"Colonel Sutherland," said she, turning haughtily round, "I am here only for an hour. I have promised to be at home when Lord Alresford returns from Avington; therefore, you will pardon me if I somewhat abruptly request you to fulfil your promise, and restore the ring that you have so long detained."

"Does his lordship know for what purpose you are here to-night?" asked Colonel Sutherland, with consummate coolness.

Lady Alresford hesitated: she could not do her husband the injury to let it be supposed he had sanctioned her visit upon such an errand; therefore, she at length replied in the negative.

"I thought so, Mildred. Had I the felicity to stand in the same relation towards you as the earl does, neither would I have suffered you to come here alone," replied he sarcastically.

Mildred felt her cheek burn.

"This is trifling: you have no right to put any questions to me, and I will answer none," replied she, angrily.

"I had the honour of seeing Lord Alresford to-day," said Colonel Sutherland, after a pause.

"Indeed! May I inquire where?" rejoined Mildred, incredulously.

"At Wardour Court. Ada yesterday was alarmed by a marvellous tale that Lady Catherine Neville had met with a serious accident, and cut her head frightfully. We drove over this morning to make due inquiries, and had the satisfaction of finding her ladyship pleasantly engaged in a very animated *tête-à-tête* with Lord Alresford, instead of reposing on a couch with her head bandaged up. What a splendid pair of eyes she has! And I never saw anything so soft and heavenly as the expression of her face."

Mildred felt indescribably irritated. Lord Alresford had not alluded even in the most remote manner to his visit. Colonel Sutherland watched her varying expression intently.

"Lady Catherine's is a style of beauty I do not admire," replied she quickly.

Colonel Sutherland laughed.

"Nay, Lady Alresford, as you seem to me to be the very paragon of good wives, you are bound to extend to all things the same degree of admiration as your lord. *His* approval of Lady Catherine, I understand, is too unmistakably evident: therefore, you ought really to take her under your patronage."

"I am disposed to act with the greatest kindness towards Lady Catherine, who invariably evinces a suitable sense of the deep obligations she is under to Lord Alresford," replied Mildred, with dignity.

"You know what malicious people say, Lady Alresford?—that she was disposed to return these obligations with greater warmth than the occasion warranted," said the colonel, slowly.

Lady Alresford rose hastily from her seat, and took up a book of engravings from the table.

"Let our conversation end, Colonel Sutherland. I have fulfilled my promise; and you, as a man of honour, are now bound to act up to yours," said she, reseating herself.

But Colonel Sutherland was saved the trouble of a reply by the presence of Mrs. St. Priest, who keenly watched the deportment of her guest, amidst all her exertion to keep up the spirit of her concert. She evidently thought for the present he had gone far enough in his colloquy with the countess; for, in her sweetest tones she affectedly requested Mildred to honour the company by a display of her unrivalled talents as a musician and songstress.

Lady Alresford immediately assented, glad of any mode of escape from Colonel Sutherland's persecution; and she was in the act of crossing the room to the piano when the door opened, and Mr. Egremont Turville was announced. He

looked amazed when he perceived Mildred's beautiful face amid such a heterogeneous assemblage.

"Lady Alresford, is it possible I see you here, and alone? I suppose you expect the earl, when his duties at Avington are over?" exclaimed he, inquiringly, after he had exchanged salutations with his hostess.

"No, I do not, indeed," replied Mildred calmly, drawing off her gloves. "But I am also surprised to meet you here, for I understood Mr. Turville likewise dined at Avington."

"Yes, so I did; but having heard your husband's splendid speech, I soon got weary of the nonsense talked afterwards, and strolled in here. But what are you going to do, Lady Alresford?"

"Sing," replied Mildred, seating herself at the piano.

And soon her notes, soft, clear, and gushing, drew all round the instrument. It was an art in which she especially excelled, and at the present moment her voice had more than its usual pathos and expression; for her heart was full, and she yielded willingly to its *épanchement*. Colonel Sutherland leaned with both arms at the end of the piano, turning over some loose pages of music; but so placed as to command a full view of her face. Loud and unanimous applause followed Lady Alresford's performance, and she was implored to sing again. Colonel Sutherland, taking up a piece of music, then approached, and in his most insinuating tones asked permission to accompany her. It was a song they had often sung in concert; and the exquisite blending of their fine voices never failed to elicit rapturous admiration. Lady Alresford hesitated, but the urgent solicitation of those around almost compelled her acquiescence. They sang: fast and thick, thoughts of bygone days came crowding on Mildred's fancy; and when she arose from the piano, it was with flushing cheek, and a tremulous glitter in her eye. Colonel Sutherland then led her to a chair at a little distance from the piano; she sat down and again he stationed himself behind her, while Mrs. St. Priest favoured her guests with a brilliant fantasia on the harp. Few words were exchanged between them; but still, unlike his former manner, there was a deep, earnest tenderness and deference in his tones, which again painfully awoke reminiscences past. Not that Mildred faltered one instant in the new-born sentiment of passionate love which pervaded her heart for her husband; but amid the soreness and irritation of disappointed hope, there was something indescribably soothing and grateful to her wounded self-esteem, in the homage even of Colonel Sutherland.

"Lady Alresford, will you favour us with this superb duet? I am almost ashamed to ask you, but one so rarely meets two people who sing like you and Edward," said Mrs. St. Priest,

rising after she had finished her fantasia, and approaching Mildred with a piece of music in her hand.

It was the splendid duo in *Il Tancredi*, "*Lasciami! non t'ascolto.*"

"Do not sing that duet, Lady Alresford," said the clear significant voice of Mr. Turville, in low tones.

"Why not? It is a great favourite, and one I have often sung," responded Mildred, coldly.

"Possibly. But take my advice, Lady Alresford, and do not sing any more this evening."

But it appeared as if it were Mildred's unlucky destiny on this night to slight all prudent counsel. She sat down before the piano, struck the opening chords of the recitative, and soon her whole soul was absorbed in its melody.

Meanwhile, Mrs. St. Priest turned to Mr. Turville, who sat watching the deportment of the company at large, with his usual dry supercilious air.

"We were so charmed, Mr. Turville, to find your cousin's reported accident untrue. People do invent such horrid stories! I thought I never saw Lady Catherine look better than she did this morning," said she.

"What accident, Mrs. St. Priest? I never heard of any accident," replied Mr. Turville, fixing his eyes keenly on the widow's face.

"Really! We were terrified yesterday by hearing that Lady Catherine had fallen, and severely injured her head. I cannot imagine what tales the world will fabricate next!" rejoined Mrs. St. Priest, shrugging her white polished shoulders.

"Humph!" mused Mr. Turville. "What a splendid display of plants you have here, Mrs. St. Priest!" continued he, after a silence of a few minutes.

"Do you think so? They must seem very shabby, even *mesquine*, after your unrivalled show at Nethercote. I never saw grounds laid out with more perfect taste than yours, Mr. Turville. How successfully you have cultivated your talent for landscape gardening!"

"Or rather old Mr. Vernon did his, Mrs. St. Priest; for the gardens at Nethercote are of his sole devising. I do not doubt, were he living, your commendation would be most flattering to his *amour propre*!"

"*Apropos* of fêtes, I suppose we shall have one at Moreton, to celebrate the return of Lord Normanton. I wonder whether he will be an acquisition to society in this neighbourhood. Do you know anything of him, Mr. Turville?"

"Most ladies, I believe, Mrs. St. Priest, consider a lord an acquisition at any time. Lord Normanton and myself were slightly acquainted at college."

"Have you heard the news of Edward Sutherland's *fracas*

at Moreton?" asked Mrs. St. Priest confidentially, after a pause.

"I hear news! Nobody ever tells me any, Mrs. St. Priest, or trouble themselves about me. I am the most solitary being in the world! What has happened at Moreton?"

"Edward's engagement is quite at an end with Miss Conway. Maude chose to take it in her head to be jealous of his admiration of Lady Alresford—which I must own I thought carried a little too far at Nethercote—and so dismissed him the following morning."

"Whoever would suspect the gentle-looking Maude Conway of being such a terrible vixen? And so, Mrs. St. Priest, she is again ready armed to enter the matrimonial lists for conquest?" exclaimed Mr. Turville, looking highly diverted.

"All is not gold that glitters, Mr. Turville. Young women are so ambitious in these days; and Maude's conduct proves that she only awaited a pretext to break with poor Edward, as she fancies the return of her brother will most probably give her the opportunity of contracting a greater marriage," replied Mrs. St. Priest.

"Upon my word, Mrs. St. Priest, it is highly entertaining to hear one lady speak of another's motives of action: it gives one an insight into the tactics of the whole sex. But I am ashamed to monopolise so much of your attention. Will you not kindly favour us with another sonata?" said Mr. Turville, rising, and leading the widow to her harp, he assiduously arranged her music, and retired again to his seat.

At the conclusion of the duct, Colonel Sutherland offered his arm to Lady Alresford.

"Mildred, do you know Maude Conway has chosen to desert me? I received a letter yesterday, in which she coolly intimates she considers our engagement at an end," said Colonel Sutherland, abruptly, as they strolled into Mrs. St. Priest's boudoir, which was separated from the drawing-room by rose-coloured silk draperies.

The blood flew to Lady Alresford's brow, as the thought suggested itself, that, perhaps Miss Conway justly attributed to her this rupture between herself and Colonel Sutherland; she thought it better policy, however, to restrain her feelings.

"As you will, doubtless, Colonel Sutherland, use every effort to obtain Miss Conway's pardon and renewed confidence, I must again beg of you no longer to delay the restoration of my ring: which, of course, it must be highly offensive to her, as it is to me, for you to retain."

"Mildred, you will be very angry with me, I fear; but the truth of the matter is, I have not your ring. Yesterday, I perceived several of the stones were loose, and knowing how much you valued it, I sent it instantly to a jeweller at Aving-

ton, who promised faithfully to return it this afternoon. That he has not done so, I trust you will be just enough not to lay to my charge ; especially as I despatched a groom on horseback this evening for it, who, I regret to say, has returned unsuccessful," said the colonel, earnestly fixing his eyes on her face.

She at once felt the falsity of the whole story ; her lips quivered with indignation.

"Colonel Sutherland, this is equivocation ! you have the ring. Are you base, dishonourable enough to deny this, and retain it ?"

"Lady Alresford ! Mildred ! Ada shall return it to you in a few days. Can you not believe me ? I have it not," exclaimed he, stooping, and passionately pressing her small hands to his lips.

She snatched them from him. A look of angry contempt flashed from her eyes.

"No, I do not believe you ! and more, Colonel Sutherland, I perceive, and detest your double dealing !" said she, vehemently.

"Lady Alresford, this is too much. You shall yet unsay this last assertion !" exclaimed he angrily, seizing her hands.

A time-piece at this moment struck one.

She broke violently from him, and re-entered the drawing-room ; and in less than ten minutes Lady Alresford, escorted by Mr. Egremont Turville, stepped into her carriage, in defiance of Mrs. St. Priest's urgent entreaties that she would stay and witness the grand *tableau* with which the evening's festivities were to conclude.

"Is Lord Alresford arrived at home ?" was the first question she put, with as much composure as she could assume on reaching Amesbury.

"Yes, my lady ; his lordship returned home at ten, and dismissed his valet about half an hour ago."

Mildred, however, felt quite sure that her husband would not retire to rest until after her return. She remembered his desire to meet her in the library : for one little second her better genius prevailed, and she paused at the door, and even laid her hand on the lock. The dread of his anger, however, overcame her resolution : she felt that she had no excuse to allege, no plea to urge, in deprecation of his reproaches ; nor was she even fortified with the inward consciousness of having succeeded in what she had hazarded so much to obtain ; so putting off the evil day, Lady Alresford darted up stairs, and entering her boudoir sank breathlessly on a couch.

CHAPTER XXII.

REMORSE.

ABOUT eight o'clock the following morning, Aglaë entered her mistress's room with a cup of coffee; Mildred, fevered with a night of fitful tossings and restless slumbers, eagerly arose, and was languidly sipping it, when her eye fell on a note reposing on the snowy damask within the tray. She hastily set down her cup, and taking the note up, perceived that its superscription was in Mrs. St. Priest's handwriting. A slight shudder passed over her; for, hitherto, her intercourse with the widow had not been productive of pleasing reminiscences; and Mildred was beginning to be uncomfortably conscious of the fact. Mrs. St. Priest's early communication ran thus:—

"MY DEAR COUNTESS,

"Accept a thousand apologies and excuses for arousing you at so unreasonable an hour; but it is all Edward's fault, I assure you, so you must scold him! Men are so *diablement entêtés*, that when once they take anything into their heads, one might as well attempt to lull the fury of the wind, as to render them amenable to reason! And now, *ma chère comtesse*, I am almost ashamed to confess the purport of my missive; but the fact is, Edward was so amazingly pleased at my poor little attempt at an entertainment last night, that he absolutely insists that a descriptive paragraph shall be inserted in the *Avington* and *Stanmore Gazettes*. With his usual hot impatience, he wished to despatch the order early this morning; but I stood firm, *inébranlable*, that at least the paragraph should be first inspected by her whose presence conferred the chief *clât* on my fête. You will find it enclosed: do not be hypercritical, *ma charmante comtesse*, *car c'est de la composition*

"*De votre toute dévouée,*

"ADA ST. PRIEST."

In an agony of alarm, Lady Alresford seized the enclosed sheet, and read,—

"On Friday evening, Mon-Bijou, the elegant mansion of Mrs. St. Priest, presented a scene of unrivalled brilliancy. The entertainment, which was more numerous than any previously given in the county this year, commenced by a concert, and terminated by a grand mythological tableau, entitled "*Les Triomphes de l'Amour*." Amongst the company

we observed the Countess of Alresford, Alfred Carmichael, Esq., and Mrs. Carmichael, Charles Egremont Turville, Esq., the Reverend George and Mrs. Wyntour, and the near relative of the accomplished hostess, Colonel Sutherland, of the — Dragoons. The concert was kept up with great spirit until a late hour. Its principal feature was the splendid duet in 'Il Tancredi,—Lasciami! non t'ascolto,' sang with rapturous applause by the beautiful Lady Alresford and Colonel Sutherland. Nothing more exquisite could be imagined than the way this gem of the opera was rendered by the performers; and for purity of tone, artistic finish, combined with the impassioned feeling with which the tender, reproachful words of the song were uttered, we may safely assert it was an unequalled performance. The festivities were kept up to a late hour; and Mrs. St. Priest's brilliant assembly will long be remembered in the neighbourhood."

Mildred fell back breathlessly on the pillow: she wildly clasped her hands as the vision of her husband's anger and disgust became vividly pictured on her imagination. Shame and inevitable disgrace menaced her, and she knew not how to extricate herself; but with this knowledge came the bitter thought that she had madly incurred it, and that in the earl's dispassionate judgment she must stand convicted of inexcusable deceit and wilful obstinacy, for having, in defiance of his stringent commands, again sought the society of Colonel Sutherland. How she should excuse herself on this one head had been all night long a subject of sore perplexity: how confess the story of the ring, which alone could furnish her with the slightest plea in deprecation of his anger. If her disgrace were published to the world,—her world, cognizant with her previous flirtation with Colonel Sutherland,—never could she hope to obtain the forgiveness of the fastidious, the sensitive earl.

What would her father, her mother, and Helen think when they also perused the artfully worded paragraph, which conveyed so much more than the truth? Never had such a complication of disgrace and misery presented itself to her imagination; and, fairly overcome with the terrors of her position, Mildred buried her fair young head in her pillow and wept—wept bitterer tears than she had ever before shed; for now self-reproach and conscious guilt mingled in the wildness of her grief.

For a few minutes she silently indulged her sorrow: it was a terrible lesson, and she writhed under it; yet, though warning multiplied upon warning, still she did not recoil from the dangerous path she was pursuing—still did not see in truth and candour her best preservatives against the impending evil; nor in the counsel and assistance of him who had vowed

to love and protect her, her surest refuge, and her best hope of meriting and obtaining forgiveness.

She took up the letter, and perused it once more ; and the flattering suggestion occurred, that as her approval was so anxiously solicited, her disapproval might possibly affect the total withdrawal of the paragraph. Quick as the thought, she sprang from the bed, and hastily throwing her dressing-gown over her shoulders, passed into her boudoir, and with fevered cheek and knitted brow, seated herself at her writing-table, and wrote a hurried note to Mrs. St. Priest. Sentences conclusive and terse flowed from her pen ; much she felt was at stake, much her own unaided tact had to accomplish—yet a kind of feminine instinct warned her to conceal the keen anxiety which preyed upon her : for Mildred, amid her other experiences, was now beginning to doubt the sterling reality of Mrs. St. Priest's pretty nothings. The note despatched, she rang for Aglaë, and finished dressing ; and then sat down with nervous impatience to await the return of her messenger. Two hours elapsed, and at length Mrs. St. Priest's reply was put into her hands. The envelope was of larger size than usual ; and when Mildred broke the seal, she found that it contained two notes. The widow's perfumed rose-coloured billet she first opened, and read :—

“ I am *desolée, ma chère comtesse*, beyond the power of expression, that I cannot comply with your request. I have given my word to allow Edward to insert the paragraph, with its just tribute to your surprising talent, and I cannot now retract. I have, however, shown him your letter, and as he is at this moment writing to you, I suspect he refuses to give me back my promise in order to have the sole glory and merit of obeying your wishes. *Adieu, ma belle comtesse*. Believe me yours, in all sincerity,

“ ADA ST. PRIEST.”

The letter dropped from Mildred's trembling hands, and she took up Colonel Sutherland's. A close, suffocating sensation overpowered her, and she hastily walked across the room to the window for air. Scarce could she muster courage to break its large well-formed seal ; a dimness seemed to obscure her vision, but, nevertheless, she resolved to know the worst. The colonel's letter contained only these few laconic lines :—

“ DEAR LADY ALRESFORD,

“ I will restore the ring, and sacrifice the paragraph which appears to inflict such extraordinary uneasiness, provided you will consent to grant me a private interview either to-day, or to-morrow. Our place of rendezvous for this purpose

perhaps you will graciously indicate. With sentiments of profound devotion, I remain,

“Your ladyship’s most obliged, obedient servant,
“EDWARD SUTHERLAND.”

The question of, what now was to be done, burst with startling, bewildering distinctness on poor Mildred’s mind. Suppose she yielded to the tempter, and granted this interview, could she, after what had passed, again place faith in Colonel Sutherland’s promises? or could she, above all, compromise her reputation by consenting to a private assignation with her quondam lover? Mildred’s pure cheek burned with shame at the bare supposition. But the alternative, the dreadful alternative of having her name held up to public scandal and ridicule in conjunction with Colonel Sutherland’s, filled her with anguish and dismay. The earl, with his shrinking sensitiveness,—how would he bear it? Even if he pardoned her duplicity, and defiance of his wishes in seeking Mrs. St. Priest’s society, would he ever overlook or forgive the odium her frivolity had brought on his name? His own words during one of their interviews at the Priory,—“Let me but respect my wife,”—sounded in her ears. Had she not already forfeited every claim to this by her heedless disregard of her reputation? and now when the worst came to his knowledge, would he not cast her from him as a thing unworthy of being loved—in capable of appreciating his affection? Deep sobs of anguish escaped her parched and quivering lips as these thoughts arose, and large drops stood on her pale brow as she threw herself on her knees, and buried her throbbing head amid the pillows of the couch against which she leaned. Then did she realise in its intensity the exceeding heaviness of the dubious course she had so long pursued, and keenly did she rue the hour in which, betrayed by a fancied sentiment of pique, she laid the foundation of that barrier which now reared its apparently impregnable front between herself and happiness.

She felt and shuddered at the subtle snare into which her unprincipled admirer had so easily lured her unsuspecting steps. Tears fell in showers from her eyes: vainly she looked round for comfort, and found none. Her long, beautiful hair hung in clusters round her face and neck, humid with excessive weeping; its weight appeared to oppress her; she dashed it aside, and paced the room with faltering steps. How could she meet her husband—how endure his gaze? With the eagerness of hope, suddenly she again snatched up the letters; her tears subsided, and she threw herself on her knees once more by the sofa, and carefully perused their contents, in the vain hope of finding a clue to lead her forth from this labyrinth of sorrow.

Soon she flung them down again in despair, and resumed her wanderings up and down the apartment. Never before did her heart revert with such fervent affection to her absent friend Helen Campbell, as in this hour of trial; and never did she so appreciate and revere that sturdy truthfulness of character, as when she felt the baneful effect of its absence in herself.

Mildred still continued to pace up and down. In vain the sun, pouring in from the windows, threw around her its cheering warmth, and glanced and sparkled with gorgeous hues on the water of the fountain without. *Her* spirit was dark; insensible to outward impressions. Her first wild outbreak of passionate grief was now over, and faint and exhausted she sank presently into a chair, and leaned her aching head on the pillow of the couch. Passive and inanimate she had thus reposed for a few minutes, when the door of her room opened without any previous demand for admission, and Lord Alresford stood before her. Her first impulse was to start to her feet—the next to hurry nervously under the cushion the papers which still strewed the sofa. Lord Alresford paused in utter amazement as he surveyed Mildred's haggard face, her swollen eyes, and negligent deportment. For one moment his features relaxed in their severity, but soon he closed the door, and advanced towards her. He fixed his eyes sternly upon her. Involuntarily, she clasped her hands.

"Lady Alresford, if this wild grief had been occasioned by regret at having acted yesterday in direct violation of my wishes, it would have brought you to me long ago with the admission of your error on your lips; its solution must be traced elsewhere: probably to the same source which induced you to set at nought your duty as a wife. I know that a messenger from Mrs. St. Priest came over here this morning with a letter for you, and that one of my grooms has been despatched to her residence on the same errand. That correspondence is probably what you now attempt so industriously to conceal; but as you can have no legitimate secret which I ought not to share with you, you will, perhaps, favour me with its perusal," said Lord Alresford, in tones which fell like bolts of ice on poor Mildred's heart, as he deliberately walked to the spot where the papers lay hidden.

A low cry of terror escaped her lips.

"Lord Alresford, I entreat, implore you to refrain! I will tell you all,—all!—everything Mrs. St. Priest's letter contains!" cried she, grasping the cushion convulsively.

Unmoved by the anguish which beamed in her tearful eyes, the earl resolutely, but very gently, released the pillow from her tenacious hold.

"No, Lady Alresford, you would withhold something! Do

you fear to let me read?" said he, in tones of stinging reproach, taking up the letters.

The earl walked to a distant window. Mildred covered her face with her hands, and her quick agitated breathing was the sole sound audible in the room. One by one he silently perused the papers. She did not once venture to raise her eyes. Presently he spoke.

"Can it be possible, Lady Alresford, you have acted the dishonourable part these letters imply? Well might you shrink from my scrutiny! What must your conversation and intimacy have been with Colonel Sutherland, to authorise him to venture upon the audacious proposal of a private assignation with you! with my wife!" exclaimed Lord Alresford, in a voice of deep emotion.

Touched to the heart by the tone and manner of her husband, Mildred sprang from the couch, and laid her trembling hand on his arm. He turned from her indignantly.

"Lord Alresford, hear me!" said she, in a voice tremulous with anguish. "However it may appear to you, I solemnly declare that my manner and language to Colonel Sutherland have been expressive of the contempt and disgust I now feel for his conduct and character. If I have sought his society since my marriage, it has been from other motives than those you attribute."

Lord Alresford turned sharply, sternly towards her.

"What motives, then, Lady Alresford? As you value—what you ought to prize most in the world—your reputation, speak unreservedly! What can your motives have been?" and he seized her hands, and gazed steadfastly in her face.

"Colonel Sutherland, the day I met him at Nethercote, insolently displayed a ring obtained from me soon after the commencement of our acquaintance, and to which he alludes in his letter. I went yesterday evening to receive it back again, in accordance with his promise to restore it at Mrs. St. Priest's concert," replied Mildred, faintly, leaning for support against the window-seat.

"Would that I could place implicit trust in your word: but you have so often deceived me! If your intentions were what you state, why did you conceal from me the purport of your visit last night? Why did you not confide in me, instead of carrying on a series of systematic deceits? Oh, Mildred! I would barter all your personal gifts in exchange for truth and sincerity of character."

Poor Mildred cowered under the stern rebuke. She clasped her hands despairingly together.

"Believe me, my lord, my visit last night had no other object, no other motive," burst falteringly from her quivering lips.

"And what is this ring, to which you attach such overpowering importance?" asked the earl, sternly and drily.

For one moment the hope of so framing her answer as to evade the query, shot through Mildred's brain. She raised her eyes to her husband's face, and therein she read the futility of such an effort: there was nothing for it but a straightforward reply.

"You cannot blame and despise me, Lord Alresford, more thoroughly than I condemn myself, when you learn that the ring I heedlessly suffered Colonel Sutherland to appropriate was the one you placed on my finger before your first departure for Italy," said she, in very low tones, while her cheek burned.

"And this you had not courage and rectitude of purpose to avow! Sooner than trust to your husband, and confidently rely on his indulgence, if not on his affection, you preferred involving yourself in the crooked mazes of intrigue! Not content with doing me an injury such as few men would listen to without overwhelming you with the keenest reproach, you have inflicted a double pang! Answer me, Lady Alresford: was it needful, in order to deceive me, and obtain back again the ring so faithlessly relinquished, that your conduct yesterday evening towards Colonel Sutherland should have been such as to empower your enemies to write and insinuate what they have dared to do in yonder paper?"

"No, Lord Alresford, I have never swerved in thought, word, or deed, from the fidelity I owe you—never! I went to Mrs. St. Priest's; in that alone have I erred: upon no other terms, I was told, could I obtain the ring. I trembled to lose the small remnant of esteem which I was sensible you still bestowed upon me. God is my witness, that my actions deserve not the construction insidiously put upon them. But you will not believe me, Lord Alresford! I am miserable—oh, very miserable!" exclaimed she, desperately: her words in low hurried accents burst from her lips, and she buried her face in her hands, while large tears dropped slowly from between her fingers.

"Mildred, do you not remember how once before you made similar protestations? I then believed your assurance that your intimacy with Colonel Sutherland was over, and that your heart never had any share in the outward preference with which you distinguished him. On this faith, I made you my wife. From that moment to this, what has your conduct towards me been, but a tissue of heartless inconsistencies? How have you repaid the unexampled indulgence I have invariably manifested towards you? Have you even given me that confidence I asked? still less, during the past three months, have you essayed to diminish the distance your inconstancy placed

between us, or to perform one single iota of those duties you voluntarily engaged to undertake?" exclaimed the earl, passionately. "I know, however, that our affections are not always controllable," continued he more calmly; "therefore, Mildred, as long as your conduct deserves it, you shall find me no tyrannical master. No particle of reproach shall, however, rest on the fame of her who bears my name. Nay, Lady Alresford, this agitation is uncalled for," added the earl. "Compose yourself, and let me learn what more passed in your interviews with Colonel Sutherland. Ah, Mildred! did I not justly tell you on Wednesday his words were then such as you dare not recount to your husband?"

A wild, mingled throb of hope and joy fluttered at Mildred's heart, during her husband's address; and more than once was she tempted to lay before him its most secret promptings. Her love burned brightly as ever; but at this moment, when she looked at the earl, and saw the clouded brow, and the stern, sad smile which curled his lip, her courage died within her. Procrastination ever builds up new and more insurmountable barriers to close the paths of uprightness; and now she dreaded, and justly, that her confession would bear the semblance of hypocrisy. She rose hastily, drank a glass of water standing on a table near her, and then, in low, hurried words, she poured forth the history of her several interviews with Colonel Sutherland. Lord Alresford listened attentively to her recital, and a deeper gloom seemed to settle on his handsome features.

"A little more, Lady Alresford, and we had ceased to reside under the same roof," at length said he, in deep, constrained tones. "Ah, Mildred, why do I not find you the fair vision imagination pictured?"

She buried her head amongst the pillows of the sofa. Low sobs shook her frame. Lord Alresford leant silently against the window. Presently she started to her feet.

"Lord Alresford, do you hate me? Do you cast me away from you for ever? Will not the expression of the deepest, the sincerest contrition for the violation of my promise, soften your resentment," exclaimed she, vehemently.

The scarlet flushing of her cheek, and the despair which glared in her beautiful eyes, alarmed the earl. He hastened to her side.

"This excitement is destroying you, Mildred. For your own sake, for mine, be calm. Be assured, I bear you no resentment. Deep sorrow, that I have been the means of dooming you to a destiny apparently so uncongenial to your sympathies and sentiments, is the only feeling which now actuates me. Your visible alienation tells me what you must daily suffer, even had I not a more silent monitor within my own bosom.

I will be patient with you, Mildred, fear not ; only make me again this one solemn promise, never more to hold the slightest communication with Colonel Sutherland. Believe me, it is more for your own sake than mine, that I exact the pledge."

She raised her eyes to his face ; their anguished expression fled, and tears rolled like dew-drops over her hot, flushed cheeks. Her hand, which he had gently taken, still lingered in his. She silently bowed her head, and pressed her soft lips on his hand.

"You will surely give me this promise, Mildred ?" said the earl, withdrawing his hand, and hastily turning away.

"Yes, most solemnly, Lord Alresford. Believe me, I shall never, never even in thought, be tempted to violate it," said she, emphatically.

"Beware, Mildred, what you promise ! Perhaps, the fortitude to control your thoughts may be less easily obtainable than the self-command requisite to follow a prescribed line of action," replied the earl, gazing sorrowfully upon her.

She was meditating on his words, and did not reply.

"One question more," said the earl : "what course did you propose to adopt with regard to the paragraph forwarded to you this morning ?"

She hesitated ; all before had been blank, agonising remorse : she had formed no settled plan, and so she confessed.

"Lady Elvaston shall be spared the pain of this *exposé*, Mildred. I will take upon myself to promise you so much, therefore be under no further alarm," said Lord Alresford, gathering up the letters from the table. "And now, farewell : you shall hear from me again in the course of the day ; and God grant this may be the last interview of so painful a nature that is ever to pass between us !" and the earl quitted the room.

A deep sigh escaped Mildred's lips, as she fell back on the sofa. An inexpressible feeling of relief, however, mingled with the poignant anxiety which still preyed upon her. She walked to the window, and breathed deeply of the soft, invigorating breeze, which played and lightly coquetted amid her long, dishevelled ringlets. A sensation of insupportable languor stole gently over her. Her mental faculties so long on the strain seemed suddenly to yield ; and completely exhausted by the agitation of the last two days, she threw herself again on the couch. Soon she slept.

With her small hands folded on her bosom she reposed : though still traces of mental disquietude appeared to haunt her dreams ; for every now and then the pale brow contracted painfully, and a sharp convulsive movement agitated her beautiful features. Her eyelids were heavy, and swelled from excess of weeping, and their long, jetty lashes reposed on a

cheek whose crimson richness, as she slumbered, faded gradually away. Spent by continual watching she slept thus for some hours; nor did she awake until the warm, cheering rays of the afternoon sun, beaming full on her face, caused her to start up and gaze around. Soon she perceived that some one had entered the room during her sleep: the window was closed, a heavy shawl had been carefully flung over her, and on a small stand near the sofa was a packet addressed to herself. She hurriedly stretched out her hand, and took it. On the envelope were a few pencilled words, to the following purport, in Lord Alresford's hand-writing:—

“I have enclosed you the whole of your correspondence with Mrs. St. Priest. The paragraph intended for the Stanmore and Avington papers is suppressed. I have also the ring in my possession, which, for obvious reasons, I retain.”

Mildred opened the envelope, and found all the notes she had ever written to Mrs. St. Priest duly enclosed; also several copies of the malicious paragraph. She reflected a moment, and presently rising laid the papers in a heap within the fender; then lighting a taper she applied the flame to the letters. Motionless she stood watching the gyrations of thin gray smoke as it gently curled upwards, until every particle of paper was consumed. Then she folded her shawl tightly across her figure, and descended the steps into her garden.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MILDRED'S AWAKENING.

THE dark spot had spread. Mildred's destiny, which to all the world seemed so fair, was distasteful, insupportable to herself. Her spirit wrestled within her, and during the succeeding few days she sedulously sought peace, and found it not. Her solitary hours were spent in dreamy reverie, in which her own misdeeds and the glowing figure of the Lady Catherine occupied the most prominent points ; or in wild restless longings for the happiness she had so recklessly thrown from her. An unappeasable desire now possessed her to perform at least all those outward duties of her high rank and new position, which conscience smote her with having hitherto neglected. In her indulgence of a species of listless isolation, she knew she had left undone much that the earl might, indeed, justly complain of. Keenly sensible of her false position in his house, she shrunk from assuming her proper place as mistress of the mansion. An indescribable feeling of confusion overwhelmed her if detected by him in the performance of anything inseparably connected with this position. She would then turn indifferently aside and make some casual observation, haunted by the foolish fear lest her husband might construe her officiousness into tacit reproach for his cold disregard. Every passing shadow on his brow she persisted in attributing to regret that he had made her his wife ; and miserable and irresolute, feeling the intolerable burden of perpetually dissembling, she at length shunned his society as much as was in her power.

But Mildred, in the depths of her self-communings, determined it should be so no longer. If his love was irretrievably lost, she would win now his esteem and respect ; and her future position, if not that of his loved wife, should be at least that of his companion and friend : she would give him at length what he had so long fruitlessly sought—her confidence on all subjects, save one. But how was she to set about it ? She had so long delayed, that difficulties multiplied around her, while she little dreamed how hard and thorny procrastination renders the path of duty. Her past irresolutions and indulgence of her craving for solitude, contributed greatly in augmenting the obstacles in her way ; for thereby she had lost that invaluable knowledge and insight into her husband's character, which now would have been a beacon and sure guide in her future operations. La Rochefoucauld says :—"II

est plus aisé de connaître l'homme en général, que de connaître un homme en particulier : " this latter knowledge Mildred had yet to acquire, and with knitted brow and perplexed air she sat pondering how these things might be.

Lady Alresford's character had been hitherto, save in a few rare cases, one essentially irresolute. Like the ivy, which, with all its grace and luxuriance, requires a firmer prop than its own tender branches yield, so she needed the help and counsel of one endowed with stronger determination than herself—one to whom she could pour forth her grievances, and in return reap encouragement and solace. Hence the secret of Helen Campbell's influence: deprived of this dear friend, Mildred's spirit drooped for lack of sympathy. Her imagination wandered now among all her new acquaintances for one who could partially supply Helen's place, and whisper in her ear words of affectionate advice. All at once her eye brightened; for the soft, calm, intellectual face of Lady Emily Baynton rose before her mental vision. Indifferent as to the good or bad opinion of her neighbours, Mildred had as yet taken little pains to conciliate them; and since her marriage she had only paid two visits at the Chauntry; but she resolved without delay to drive thither that very afternoon, and if she found Lady Emily amiable and propitious, as fancy inwardly predicted, consult her on her future course. While Mildred sat thus immersed in these hopeful cogitations, the luncheon bell rang; and faithful to her new resolutions, she determined upon descending and joining the earl in that meal, instead of partaking of it alone in her boudoir, as had latterly been her habit.

Lord Alresford appeared surprised and pleased at her appearance; especially as she exerted herself more successfully than usual to be agreeable.

"I wish to call upon Lady Emily Baynton to-day. Have you any objection, Lord Alresford?" said she with some hesitation, when she arose from the table.

"Not the slightest, Mildred, to your going to the Chauntry; though I have a very serious objection to your asking my permission in that very unique style," said the earl, laughingly. "If you like, I will ride with you there: I want to speak to Baynton."

She paused: the earl's presence would, perhaps, prevent the conversation, in which her future plans were to be unfolded to Lady Emily's scrutiny; and she had quite set her heart on the interview.

"I see you would rather go alone, Mildred, so I will order the open carriage to be at the door in twenty minutes."

In a second his manner recalled her to herself.

"No, indeed, I shall enjoy the expedition much more if you

will accompany me; and the ride, infinitely better than a sober airing in the carriage; so I will go and put on my habit," replied she quickly.

And in half an hour they were riding side by side along green shady lanes, enjoying the breeze which gently swayed the spreading branches, and scattered here and there small handfuls of leaves, first tributes of the approaching autumnal season. They rode slowly along; the day was so fine, that Mildred threw back her veil, for there was freshness and exhilaration in the soft wind, as it fanned her brow.

"Mildred, why did you hesitate, when I proposed to ride with you this afternoon?" said Lord Alresford, after a long pause, checking his horse, and bringing it closer to hers.

It was a difficult question. The earl patiently awaited her reply.

"You are a keen confessor, Lord Alresford," replied she at length, unable to restrain a laugh. "Perhaps, you will consider my reply more frank than courteous, when I candidly avow that I was debating, as I fully intend to monopolise Lady Emily all to myself, whether I might not perchance find your lordship *de trop*."

"Oh," replied the earl, in rather a dissatisfied tone, giving rein to his horse.

Mildred remembered the earl's disapproval of female *confidentes* and smiled.

They rode on in silence for a quarter of a mile or more until they came in sight of the picturesque little village of Weldon, nestling at the side of a hill; its clean white cottages with their trellised fronts glittering in the sun, all thrown out in strong relief by the magnificent woods already sprinkled by autumnal tints, which clothed the rising grounds behind.

"Here come Mrs. St. Priest and Colonel Sutherland, or I am much mistaken, Mildred," said Lord Alresford, as the widow's low carriage whirled round from a distant turn in the road, and the sharp clicking trot of her well-trained piebalds soon was heard.

Lady Alresford made no reply, and though the colour mounted to her cheek, she looked steadily before her, and when the phaeton passed, deliberately turned away her beautiful face. Lord Alresford, however, felt himself compelled to make some acknowledgment of the salute wafted towards him by the widow's fairy fingers. As for Colonel Sutherland, a dark, angry frown hung on his brow; but, as he thought fit to imitate Lady Alresford, and sedulously turn aside his head, the earl was spared all *embarras* on his account. As soon as the carriage had fairly passed, Mildred turned, and stole a furtive glance at her husband. Their eyes met: he had been intently regarding her; the subject, however, was too sore a

one to be safely broached, and so they rode on in silence, until they arrived at the door of Sir Gerard's mansion. He was loitering in the hall, and instantly flew to greet them.

"My mother will be delighted to see you, Lady Alresford; it was only the other day she was complaining that you so very seldom included the Chauntry in your ride," said Sir Gerard good-humouredly, as he helped Mildred from her horse; and giving her his arm he led her to his mother's room, followed by Lord Alresford.

When they entered, Lady Emily was sitting at her writing-table. She instantly arose, and gave Mildred so warm a welcome—one more cordial than any she had received since her sojourn in this land of strangers—that, involuntarily, tears rushed to her eyes. She gazed admiringly on Lady Emily's striking dignity of manner, tempered by her sweet smile and soft voice; on the expression of profound repose which lingered in her thoughtful eyes, and sat on her brow, betokening that for her the world, its passions and stern conflicts, had passed away, merged in the glorious hope of an hereafter, bright, unfading, and eternal. Everything in the room evinced the benevolent activity and occupation of its owner; and Mildred felt absolutely ashamed, as she compared her own deeds with those, the outward evidence of which surrounded her on all sides. Yet Lady Emily possessed as refined a taste, and from her youth upwards had been surrounded with the same elegances, and lived as much in their daily appreciation and enjoyment, as Lady Alresford did. How she combined the two, Mildred was anxious to learn; and it was with feelings of real satisfaction that, some half hour after their arrival, she saw Sir Gerard (who, since his return from the Priory, considered himself a farmer of the first order), carry off the earl to inspect a wondrous field of Swedish turnips, which, in his opinion, had claim to precedence over all other crops in the neighbourhood.

When the gentlemen left, Lady Emily took her work and seated herself near the window. The garden lay on the other side of the mansion, and the first trees of a noble avenue stretching far away into the park, grew within a hundred yards of the window; while the sunbeams, as they pierced the thick leafy canopy overhead, chequered the grass with a thousand fitful fantastic lights. The rapid query—would this ever be Helen's abode? darted through Mildred's mind—and she thought how much she should like to aid her in acquiring so beautiful a home. She glanced at Lady Emily, and decided that a daughter with Helen's calm, reflective disposition would suit her admirably. Presently her voice sounded again like music on Mildred's ear; Lady Emily talked of duties and responsibilities which the cherished, indulged heiress had

never heard of before. Soon Mildred became absorbed; new lights seemed to burst with beautiful brilliancy over her spirit, and she comprehended in part what it was her husband found so deficient in her character: perceived, in short, that life had stern duties, stern realities, even for the rich and exalted; and that for them also it was but a bubble—glittering, indeed, with the brilliant rays of the prism—which must one day burst and fall to the earth, dissolved in the common element, undistinguishable and undistinguished. Mildred listened; her earnest enthusiastic nature was roused; and when Lady Emily turned to talk on lighter subjects, she could scarce control her impatience.

“I wish Helen Campbell could hear you converse on these things, Lady Emily. It is wonderful how her sentiments correspond with yours; though I know not how it is, her words never fell upon me with the convincing power of yours,” said Mildred, musingly.

“Probably, my dear Lady Alresford, you did not then feel, or see their necessity. A wider career has since opened upon you, and you have begun to meditate: to think that so much has not been bestowed upon you for your own selfish enjoyment, while numbers, equal with yourself in the eye of God, lack even bread. But I should much like to renew my acquaintance with Helen Campbell. I suspect she has stolen away from me a large share of my son’s heart,” continued Lady Emily, with a quiet smile. “Poor Gerard, in his hasty impulsive manner, was frantic for me to invite her here immediately; but I thought it more prudent, as she was sure to visit you, to defer my invitation until I had obtained some insight into her character. Mrs. Campbell had no remarkable talents, save that of a good managing housewife; and I am often puzzled to divine how her daughter became possessed of such uncommon qualifications.”

“Helen Campbell is a pearl—a treasure, Lady Emily! A girl with a right noble spirit: firm, without harshness or obstinacy; loving, without weakness, yet unchangeable! Before my marriage, she was a greater comfort to me than I can express. Yes; and many, many bitter hours would have since been spared me, had I followed her advice,” said Mildred, pausing, while a shade of sadness swept over her face. “Lady Emily, has Sir Gerard ever related to you any passages gleaned from the history of the few weeks intervening between Lord Alresford’s return and our marriage?”

“My son is the very reverse of communicative on such matters, Lady Alresford,” replied Lady Emily, reservedly.

“Nay, dear Lady Emily, pray be frank with me. Away from my mother, and all my early friends, I feel greatly the need of advice: and as I sincerely hope you will bestow upon

me some of the benefit of your experience, I shall indeed be glad if Sir Gerard has hinted to you the lamentable misunderstanding which has ever since poisoned my peace;" and Mildred raised her eyes imploringly to Lady Emily's face.

"Gerard has alluded once or twice, I believe, to some misunderstanding relative I think to Colonel Sutherland. Am I not right, my dear Lady Alresford?" asked Lady Emily, with considerable hesitation.

"Quite right: but oh! Lady Emily, what I shall eternally reproach myself with is, that from a mere shadow, a passing cloud, I suffered that affair, by capricious frivolity, to gather and thicken, until now it has settled round me in dark, hopeless gloom."

There was deep pity in Lady Emily's thoughtful eyes, as she gazed upon the fair young brow so anxiously raised.

"Do not speak thus, Lady Alresford. There may have been much of youthful error, much of indecision in your past career; but all this your husband tacitly obliterated from his memory in making you his wife. Persevere in the course pleasing to him; it can but be the right one; and then, of all women in the world, I should think Lord Alresford's wife the happiest."

Mildred mournfully shook her head.

"She *might* be the happiest. But, Lady Emily, if it will not weary you, I will recount my history during the past two months;" and without circumlocution, or an attempt to justify herself, Mildred ingenuously related her late adventure with Colonel Sutherland and Mrs. St. Priest.

"This is a very painful history, my dear Lady Alresford, and I sincerely hope you will never forget the stern lesson it inculcates," replied Lady Emily, gravely, after a moment's pause. "You request my advice: I recommend—remembering you have been throughout essentially in the wrong, and your husband right—that you should plainly testify your regret for the past, and your appreciation of his forbearance. Mind, I do not advocate any humiliating concessions: but to a man of your husband's proud and somewhat reserved disposition, think how peculiarly galling your conduct must have been; therefore, it is both your duty and interest to allay the irritation which must naturally exist in his mind. Above all, Lady Alresford, never attempt, in the most remote degree, to repeat the dangerous experiment; for, trust me, no man whose affection is worth having can ever be piqued into an avowal of it."

"This is true, very true; but I am sorely perplexed how to act upon your advice," exclaimed Mildred, with a puzzled look.

"Let us see and reason upon it a little, my dear Lady Alresford. I always like to penetrate to the bottom of difficulties.

In the first place, I am sure, however you may have hitherto concealed it from yourself, that you love your husband."

Mildred raised her clear eyes to Lady Emily's face.

"That eloquent glance, my dear, tells me you do, and in no common degree," resumed her kind friend; "and, therefore, I am sure you cannot wish this miserable alienation to continue. You must begin by throwing off all restraint in your intercourse with your husband; assume your proper place in your mutual home; and be assured in due time reconciliation and happiness will follow. I know that timidity, and a certain sensation of *mauvaise honte*, which people always experience when they feel themselves compelled to act in opposition to what is supposed their deliberate choice, will prove hindrances; but these must be overcome. In short, my dear, as you seem to have exerted unwearied pains and ingenuity to induce the earl to think you do not love him, so now you must labour as industriously to make him disbelieve it again as quickly as you can," added Lady Emily, with a smile.

"But will he not naturally suspect me of hypocrisy, even if Lord Alresford has not now quite given up all desire of being beloved?" replied Mildred, thoughtfully.

"Not desire it! What can you mean, dear Lady Alresford? You have selected me as your physician; and, therefore, must excuse me if I probe my patient's wound a little deeper."

"You know, Lady Emily, I was betrothed to my husband when a mere child. Now, even in your wisdom, do you not see the possibility of Lord Alresford's heart having unconsciously wandered elsewhere, though his honour forbade him to shrink from his engagement to me?" said Lady Alresford, hesitatingly, tears swimming in her eyes.

Lady Emily's piercing glance rested on Mildred's face with earnest scrutiny.

"No, I do not think it at all possible, my dear."

"And yet Lord Alresford was constantly in the society of Lady Catherine Neville," murmured Mildred, timidly.

"Who could have put this ridiculous idea into your head, my dear Lady Alresford?"

"I do not know; though I understand the news of Lord Alresford's marriage created unmitigated astonishment throughout the neighbourhood. Was not this the case, Lady Emily?"

"No astonishment was ever expressed in my presence, and I doubt very much that it was pretended by anyone: save, perhaps, by Mrs. St. Priest, and her clique of *mauvaises langues* in the neighbourhood. I do not believe Lord Alresford ever had the most fleeting desire to make Lady Catherine his wife; nay, I feel convinced he never had," replied Lady Emily, very decisively.

Mildred felt more reassured by Lady Emily's prompt tones than she had done for months.

"You will ponder over my advice, and come and see me again soon," said Lady Emily, kindly ; taking her hand as the gentlemen, returning from their walk, advanced leisurely up the avenue ; "nay, more, Lady Alresford, try my prescription, and then I dare even hope you will return to your physician with half your cure accomplished."

Mildred warmly pressed her hand, and a smile of hope circled her beautiful mouth, as she arose and resumed her hat and gloves.

"How long will it be before your friend Miss Campbell delights us with her presence ?" asked Sir Gerard, as some quarter of an hour afterwards he placed the bridle of her horse in Lady Alresford's hands, and bade her farewell.

"Oh, I hope in a few weeks—a fortnight or so, perhaps. I shall certainly plead your anxiety, Sir Gerard, to hasten her movements," replied Mildred, laughing.

"Baynton appears quite captivated with Miss Campbell. I never saw him so *épris* with any girl before," said Lord Alresford, as they slowly rode down the avenue.

"Yes ; when Helen visits Amesbury I should not be at all surprised were he to propose to her," rejoined Mildred.

"I should regret very much if he did, notwithstanding all Miss Campbell's fine qualities. Unequal marriages are seldom productive of happiness ; and I certainly do not consider Helen Campbell a suitable match for my friend Baynton," replied the earl.

Mildred, though provoked at this attack on her friend's eligibility to become the wife of Sir Gerard, made no reply to the earl's observation, and the greater part of their ride home passed in mutual silence. Mildred *rêveuse*, and absorbed in Lady Emily's counsel, found therein abundant material to build innumerable fairy castles ; forgetful that, however much we may find it necessary to revolve the future, if we wish prosperity to our schemes, the present also must be diligently and carefully improved.

The result of Mildred's cogitations, nevertheless, was not so entirely devoid of immediate benefit as this last observation would seem to imply. Determined at once to enter upon her grand project of reform, she made her appearance just one quarter of an hour before dinner was announced ; nor did she rise from table, as had been her usual custom, a few minutes after dessert was placed thereon ; and when Lord Alresford entered the drawing-room, it was from the fair hands of his bride that he received his cup of coffee. She then took her work-basket, and drawing a sofa near to the table, seated herself with the composed air of one determined to make

herself comfortable for 'a long evening. Not that Mildred felt any very remarkable degree of composure; far from it; for though a pleasant smile beamed on her face, she was sensible of a very uncomfortable feeling at heart. As for Lord Alresford, finding his wife in a more accessible humour than ordinary, he did not propose to while away the evening with a book, but seated himself by her side. For about three-quarters of an hour or more they conversed, and Mildred felt that she enjoyed more even this restrained intercourse than her solitary boudoir musings. Presently the clock struck ten; she started—so rapidly had time fled, and yet she had not taken the first step in the new character she had resolved to assume. She had yet made no overture at reconciliation since the morning the earl quitted her presence in anger; and until this was done—until there existed a perfect understanding between them both, that the past was forgiven—she felt it almost hopeless to enter upon her task of conciliation. But to plunge into the mazes of this almost forbidden ground required no small portion of moral courage; therefore, poor Mildred's spirits suddenly became subdued, and her eyes were more studiously bent upon the group of glowing pomegranates she was working. Lord Alresford made no remark on her sudden abstraction; perhaps concluding that one of her variable moods was fast clouding over. Her long, glossy ringlets hung low, and veiled her face, or, perhaps, he might have divined, from the varying hue of her cheek, that some unusual emotion agitated her. Her fair head drooped still lower over the canvas as she spoke.

"Are you still displeased with me, Lord Alresford? Have you forgiven the pain my thoughtlessness inflicted last week?" she asked, after a long silence, in very low tones, slightly glancing towards him.

A short pause ensued. She continued working nervously.

"Do you ask this, Mildred, because you think it a necessary duty, or is it that you really value my forgiveness?" said Lord Alresford, earnestly.

"I say it, because it grieves me to have incurred your just displeasure: but believe me, Lord Alresford, I am deeply, deeply grateful for all you have done for me; and above all, for your forbearance, which so surpassed my deserts," replied Mildred, her voice faltering the least in the world.

"Put down your work then, Mildred, and listen to me," said the earl, taking the canvas from her hands; she relinquished it without an effort. "Now, Mildred, I am going to appeal to your reason, to your sense of propriety," resumed Lord Alresford: "in the eye of God, in the eye of man, you are my wife, and in voluntarily consenting to take that position, you incurred a vast load of responsibility: new duties unfolded

themselves to you ; in a more special manner your example is looked up to, by your equals as well as those placed beneath you. Now, I would ask, is it fitting that this responsibility should remain longer disregarded by you, or that to our whole household, the spectacle of our alienation in heart and deed should be daily exhibited ? ”

“ You are right, Lord Alresford, I see my error. Believe me, however, my solitary meditations have not been profitless ; and from henceforth I will try to be all you can desire,” replied Mildred, sorrowfully.

“ Will you do so ? Will you, indeed, become my companion, dear Mildred, and sometimes also show me a glimpse of your heart ? Let me read its language, and then confess if my interpretation be right ? ”

A smile of assent trembled on her lips.

“ If you faithfully perform this ; and, moreover, give me that confidence I have hitherto so vainly asked, Mildred ; and consult me, and only me, in every future difficulty, I promise you I will never more reproach you : I will forget the past,” said the earl, taking her hand.

Involuntarily her little fingers closed over his.

“ I will engage to do all this, Lord Alresford : you shall never more find me ungrateful, insensible to your goodness, or heedless of your remonstrance. Mine has been too bitter a lesson to need repetition. Am I then forgiven ? ” exclaimed she, while tears dropped from her eyes, and she turned her flushed, agitated face towards him.

“ Can you doubt it for a moment ? Oh, Mildred, how many heartburnings would have been spared us, had you possessed resolution to confide in me, after your first interview with that unprincipled man at Nethercote ! ” said Lord Alresford, as he threw his arm round her.

Her head sank on his bosom.

“ Tell me, assure me again, Mildred, that Colonel Sutherland never possessed your heart.”

“ He never did—never ! ” murmured she.

For one instant, with happiness unspeakable filling her heart, she rested in his arms ; the next moment she started hurriedly away : the dark shadow of her evil genius—pique, again interposed, and her spirit quailed beneath its baneful influence.

In her hasty movement, a small gold chain on her neck became accidentally entangled round one of the buttons of the earl's coat. Pride, in the twinkling of an eye, suggested the unworthy thought, that he might construe this accident into an artful device and lure. In an instant she snatched it away, and the slender chain fell to the ground. She turned away, however, and busied herself in collecting into her basket the

scattered wools on the table. Her hand trembled ; the more so as she felt that Lord Alresford's eyes were riveted upon her. She shrank under his steady scrutiny, and unable longer to endure the ordeal, she hurriedly traversed the room, and opening the piano, sat down before it. Her voice faltered, and soon she found the impossibility of articulating a word. Again she rose, and making some unintelligible apology to her husband, who still lounged with perturbed brow where she had left him, she fled the apartment.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A SCENE AT MORETON.

"WHERE are you going, my dear?" asked Mrs. Otway, about eleven o'clock one fine morning, as Lady Catherine entered the sitting-room, attired for a walk.

"First to the gardener's lodge, to inquire how Brown's sick child passed the night; and then on to Moreton, to take Maude this lovely bouquet of damask roses: the last, I fear, of the season."

"Well, my dear Catherine, you certainly are the best judge how far your health can stand the excessive fatigue of the long walks you persist in taking day after day. I do not consider it an advisable system; and, forgive me, my dear, neither do I think it becomes a young lady of your rank to rove about miles away from home, without the attendance of her maid."

"I should only find Wilmot in my way; and she, I know, would dislike excessively being dragged from her usual routine of business: so, my dear Mrs. Otway, tell me why should I both bore her and myself? I will take Sappho as a guard," replied Lady Catherine.

"I don't know, I am sure, Catherine. I only wish you would give up these walks, and be more like what you used to be. There is, my dear, something so false and hollow in the existence you now lead, that it perfectly shocks me to reflect upon it," continued Mrs. Otway, growing eloquent. "Everything you once liked now seems insipid: your music, your drawing, your books, your friends, have lost their attraction! I am sure I heartily wish Frederick Randolph had been far enough off before he ever crossed our path. Ah, there she goes," soliloquised the old lady to herself, looking sorrowfully after her pupil, who lightly blowing a kiss and shaking her head, stepped out on the terrace, "with her sweet, pale brow and pretty smile, just as if she would try to make me believe there was nothing

the matter. Courtship is come to a pretty pass in these days, truly: yet people talk of new ways being better than old ones. I wonder what that angel in heaven, Lady Willingham, would say, if she could only behold that dear child's distress!" and kind Mrs. Otway, overpowered by her feelings, turned silently to her beloved knitting for consolation.

Meanwhile, the object of her solicitude, after paying her visit at the gardener's lodge, walked quietly on towards Moreton Place. Lady Catherine, we have before said, had a mind essentially energetic. Though sorely smitten, she was not crushed under the blow which had robbed her of peace. She knew that the best antidote to the ravages of silent grief is unceasing activity, bodily and mental; and this hard discipline she at once embraced. True, as Mrs. Otway asserted, though she had lost all relish in the things which once constituted the charm of her life, she read, she drew, she practised music with unceasing perseverance; and when all this was duly accomplished, her greatest luxury was to roam alone in the depths of her beautiful woods: yet even then she struggled nobly and bravely to control her thoughts, knowing that to be perpetually brooding over misfortune does but aggravate its real evil, by suggesting to the restless mind dire forebodings of future ills, which, after all, may never be realised. Her cheek was pale, yet she did not, in a spirit of murmuring discontent, disdain to cull the humbler flowers which still grew even under the cloudy atmosphere of trial and disappointment; sustained, perhaps, in her struggles with herself by the still reviving influence of Hope: that precious boon an Allwise Providence has decreed shall animate the breast of even the most miserable.

She walked on, reasoning and communing with herself—for none could share and alleviate her burden—steeling her heart to submit courageously to the stern discipline of life. Sappho bounded before her, snuffing the air eagerly, now rolling on the cool turf, or scrambling in the hedge bottoms and adjacent spinnies after some unfortunate hare or rabbit; then after a short headlong chase to the extent of the meadow, returning frisking and frolicking around her mistress, rubbing her huge head against her gown, and doing all she could to ask for a gentle caress in reward of her prowess. As Lady Catherine reached the small gate from the meadows into the gardens at Moreton, a travelling carriage drove swiftly from the porch of the mansion; and, thinking it might possibly be Lord Normanton who had just taken his departure, she lingered awhile, unwilling immediately to intrude on his mother and sisters. Lady Normanton having a perfect horror of large dogs, Sappho was left outside the little gate; while Lady Catherine, after a stroll round the flower garden, entered the house, and,

being on terms of close intimacy with the family, proceeded at once to the morning-room. As she opened the door, a sharp, hysterical sob, and the sound of Johnson's voice in earnest expostulation, broke on her ear; but often as Lady Catherine had been initiated into the peculiar susceptibilities of Lady Normanton's nerves, she certainly was not prepared for the scene which burst upon her astonished sight, for she paused in mute amazement on the threshold of the apartment. On a sofa lay Lady Normanton, just recovering from a fit of strong hysterics, her hair pushed back from her brow, which her maid was copiously bathing with Eau de Cologne, her hands tightly grasping the sides of the couch, and her lips white and firmly compressed. On a table near stood smelling salts, vinegar, hartshorn, and sal volatile: the table had evidently been pushed violently aside, for its cover was half torn off, and a large vase of flowers lay overturned and shattered, the water dripping on the carpet. Maude Conway, with a face pale as ashes, leant silent and motionless near the fireplace: while her sister, with a cross, cynical expression of countenance, stood near the sofa, directing Johnson in no very gentle tones, in the varied operations necessary for her mistress's recovery.

"Gracious Heavens, Maude! what does all this mean?" cried Lady Catherine, advancing into the room.

Maude made no answer, but her lips became paler still.

"Maude, why do you not speak? Isabella, what in the world is all this about? Has anything dreadful happened?" exclaimed Lady Catherine, seizing her friend by the arm, and making her sit down, whilst she gently chafed her temples.

"Mamma and Maude dearly love to get up a piece of excitement, so do not look so terrified, Catherine; and, above all, pray don't faint too: we have enough upon our hands already," replied Isabella, spitefully glancing at her mother, whose fragile figure seemed convulsed with sobs.

"You have not yet answered my question, Isabella," responded Lady Catherine, coldly.

"Why, Maude may thank herself for it all; and luckily for us, she has only her own vacillation to blame. The cause of all this tremendous uproar is, that Colonel Sutherland came here this morning, and insisted on an interview with Maude; now, if she had properly dismissed him, he would not have dared to do this. He insolently refused to quit the house until she complied with his request, and at length mamma's nerves became so frightfully agitated, that Maude found herself obliged to consent—so down she came: but in the midst of the colonel's agonised declamation, who should arrive but Normanton! I cannot tell you, then, what passed; except that on Colonel Sutherland's refusing again to leave the

house, high words ensued, showers fell from Maude's eyes, mamma screamed, and at length the colonel left, vowing to demand satisfaction. Normanton expressed himself quite ready to afford it; so, I suppose, the upshot of this romantic affair will be a challenge, and a duel. Normanton has this moment driven from the door, and leaves us in the delightful confusion you see."

"Dear Maude, take courage! the affair may still be adjusted: it is still quite possible to prevent the meeting," said Lady Catherine, inexpressibly shocked, wiping away the tears which bedewed Maude's pale cheek.

"Maude loves notoriety, and she may have it now to her heart's content," observed Isabella, sarcastically.

"My brother—my dear, kind brother!" murmured Miss Conway, shudderingly, covering her eyes.

In the meantime, Lady Catherine's presence had done more towards restoring Lady Normanton's nerves, than all the lotions, drops, and essences on the table. She now raised her head from the cushion, and repeated her daughter's last words.

"Your brother—your dear kind brother! Yes, Maude, you may well talk of your dear brother, when you reflect on the pretty predicament your folly has entailed," exclaimed she in a feeble, querulous, weeping voice. "I am the most miserable woman in existence. My son will be murdered!" continued she, wringing her hands frantically. "That odious Colonel Sutherland! I always foreboded some evil would come from his acquaintance. I told Maude so: but all my children delight in tormenting me. Johnson, I wish you would not scrub my poor head as if you were handling a block of wood! Give me some more drops, quick!"

Miss Isabella Conway watched the operation and then said—

"I suppose your ladyship is now sufficiently recovered. Johnson, you may go; and for the love of Heaven, carry away with you all that array of pots, jars, and bottles. Faugh! the room smells like a druggist's shop!" and she turned away superciliously, and threw the window open. "Give me a clean handkerchief, and fetch me down another cap, Johnson, for I see the sal volatile has stained my ribands. Really, Isabella, you have no consideration for an invalid. Well, Lady Catherine, what do you think of this most dreadful affair? Is not Maude's folly perfectly incredible in bringing that man here, when she knew we were daily expecting Normanton?"

"I do not think Maude is to blame in the slightest degree. Lady Normanton; and I consider she is most unjustly and unnecessarily accused by yourself and Isabella. I am sure Lord Normanton acquits her."

"But that is no reason why she should be right, Lady Catherine. I verily believe Maude has bewitched her brother

he would have thought twice before he exposed his life, either for me or Isabella," replied Lady Normanton, tartly.

"Well, Lady Normanton, allow me to suggest that, instead of overwhelming your innocent daughter with unmerited reproach, it would now be a wiser course to consider what can be done to prevent this unhappy duel. Do you know where Lord Normanton is gone?" asked Lady Catherine, in accents of strong indignation, as she glanced at Maude's suffering, despairing face.

"Normanton never tells *me* anything," rejoined Lady Normanton, fretfully.

"Do you know, Isabella?"

"Not I! Normanton flew off in so mighty a tantrum, that I should almost imagine his coachman might drive him to Witham before he could collect his ideas to give an intelligible direction. He is probably wandering somewhere between Moreton and the aforementioned place."

"Maude, dearest, cannot you give any hint where your brother is gone? I will then go at once to the Chauntry and ask Sir Gerard's intervention. You know he is the only person in this neighbourhood well acquainted with Lord Normanton," said Lady Catherine soothingly, gently pressing her lips to the forehead of her friend.

Maude shook her head mournfully.

"I feel perfectly convinced that nothing will come after all of this mighty fuss. Normanton and Colonel Sutherland, when they recover their senses, will think better before they hazard their lives for this most ridiculous broil—so cheer up, Maude!" said Miss Isabella Conway, composedly taking a book of engravings from the shelf.

"Well, I must own Normanton has made a delightful finale to all his romantic foolery about being married for love. If he had followed other people's example, taken a wife, and settled quietly down with his mother and sisters, this *embarras* never would have happened. Instead of which, after roving about Italy for the last three years, nobody knows wherefore, he comes back to be shot by his sister's unprincipled admirer."

"He would have done better, mamma, don't you think so, had he married the opera girl, and remained abroad?" interposed Isabella, sneeringly.

"I wish you would not interrupt me, Isabella. Be assured that your brother, if he gets out of this scrape, will make a much better match than you will ever do," rejoined Lady Normanton, querulously; her eye glancing on the Lady Catherine, who kneeling by her friend's side, was holding an earnest whispered conference.

"Very likely: only it may just be possible that some other people, also, may not like to be married for their money,"

replied Isabella, coolly, following the direction of her mother's eye.

"If anything should happen to your brother, we shall be turned out of Moreton. Never was anybody so persecuted by adverse circumstances as I have been throughout life! That odious reprobate, Robert Conway, who has just bade adieu to Newgate, will be heir-at-law. My children are nothing to me! though, after all, poor dear Normanton is the most dutiful and loving; and that, I suppose, is the reason why he is going to be snatched from me," exclaimed Lady Normanton, commencing another loud fit of hysterical sobbing.

Miss Isabella Conway arose, and taking a smelling-bottle from the table, put it under her mother's nose.

"Ring for Johnson! Take it away, Isabella!" cried Lady Normanton, violently jerking the bottle from her daughter's hand, and sneezing and coughing, as the powerful fumes of the ammonia mounted to her brain.

"Maude, as you sit close to the bell, just ring twice for Johnson, and her paraphernalia," exclaimed Miss Isabella, coolly, returning to her book.

"We will only delay one moment, Lady Normanton, before we summon your maid. Maude wishes to speak to Hughes immediately," said Lady Catherine, starting to her feet; and, before a word could be spoken in reply, she pulled the bell-rope.

The servant entered. Lady Catherine turned towards Miss Conway; but, seeing her make one unavailing effort to speak, said at once,—

"We wish to know, Hughes, whether you heard Lord Normanton give any directions to his coachman where to drive on leaving Moreton?"

"Why, my lady, my young master took his departure in such confusion, that I have no very clear recollection of what passed; but I believe he told the boys to drive to Sir Gerard Baynton's."

"Oh, very well: that will do, Hughes. Lady Normanton wishes her maid to be sent here directly," said Lady Catherine, exchanging a quick glance with Maude.

"Mamma, I shall go immediately, and alone, to the Chantry," said Maude, rising, and speaking in low resolute tones.

"Indeed, Miss Conway! I see my children do not care a straw whether I live or die. Tell Normanton from me I will never speak to him as long as I exist, unless he gives up this wicked duel. It will be the death of me. I shall never get the better of the excitement," exclaimed Lady Normanton, bathing her flushed cheeks with Eau de Cologne.

"You will find that you are flying off on a sad bootless

errand, Maude, I can tell you. You might just as well essay to move the Peak of Teneriffe as to shake Normanton's obstinate self-will. I should advise you to drive to Mon-Bijou, as a more accessible point," said Isabella, slowly. After a moment's pause, she continued, "Catherine, as Maude is going to be otherwise engaged, I should be glad if you will accept me as the companion of your walk."

"I am sorry to decline your proposal, as when I leave Moreton I shall return straight home," replied Lady Catherine, coldly; for she was more disgusted than she would willingly have expressed, at Isabella's unfeeling deportment.

"*Bon! Ce qu'on perd d'un côté on gagne de l'autre!*" muttered she, haughtily turning away, and sweeping out of the room, as Johnson entered armed with her drops.

"I hope, Lady Normanton, you will not be displeased with Maude, if she comes to Wardour instead of returning here after her visit to Lady Emily. Change of air and scene will be most beneficial to her. I trust you make no objection to my proposal."

"None in the world, I assure you, Catherine. Maude's absence will be a positive relief from most painful reminiscences. You have my full permission, Maude; and if anything *should* result from your visit to the Chauntry, perhaps you will not think it too much trouble to communicate it to myself and your sister."

"Certainly not, mamma," responded poor Maude.

"If people only knew the torment children bring, I am sure they never would marry. Shut the window, Johnson, and then you may fan me, whilst I make an effort to snatch a short repose," said Lady Normanton, peevishly.

Lady Catherine and Maude Conway quitted the room.

"Never mind what they say, dearest Maude. As for Isabella and her stony heart, nobody listens to her a moment; and Lady Normanton's spirits, we must allow, have been frightfully agitated this morning; besides which, we ought to remember these fretful moods are partly the result of failing health. Come, dearest, I will go with you to your room, put on your cloak, and see you fairly start; or, perhaps, that Philistine of a sister of yours may be down upon you again," said Lady Catherine, laughing.

With her own fair hands, Lady Catherine equipped her friend for her expedition, and then helped her to pack up the few things necessary for her visit to Wardour; for Johnson was still too much engaged to offer any assistance. Having then seen Maude fairly off beyond the lodge gates, she turned into the shrubby path which led to the meadows. An unaccountable weight oppressed her spirits, and a deeper gloom overpowered her, than when, some two hours ago, she trod the

same path. Vainly she sought its cause in the agitating incidents of her visit ; but, though deeply pained for Maude Conway's sake, Lord Normanton, comparatively speaking, was now a stranger to her, and Colonel Sutherland, even more than indifferent ; so that the circumstance, dreadful as it was, of their anticipated hostile encounter, could not produce the depression under which she fruitlessly tried to rally. When she reached the little gate, Lady Catherine paused, for no Sappho came bounding forwards with furious vehemence to welcome her back. Concluding that, like some animals of the human species, poor Sappho's constancy was of a very fleeting description, and that she had returned home, Lady Catherine walked on a few yards, when, chancing to glance round the field, she perceived her at some distance, crouched on a mossy bank, her nose resting complacently between her huge paws, and by her side, no less comfortably lounged a gentleman. Not recognising the individual thus patronised by her favourite, Lady Catherine stopped, and called the dog. Sappho bounded up, and after shaking herself, rushed forwards towards her mistress ; while the gentleman, when he arose and turned his head, Lady Catherine knew to be her cousin Mr. Turville.

She walked forwards to meet him.

"I was crossing these meadows, Catherine, and seeing your dog at Lady Normanton's gate, I knew you were near. I hope your displeasure will not be kindled at my presuming to keep watch with Sappho, or that I have seized the first opportunity since my banishment of speaking to you out of your own grounds," said Mr. Turville, slowly.

There was something in his tone which caused Lady Catherine deep pain.

"I wish you would not talk to me in this manner ; you know, Charles, I am always glad to see you," replied she, hastily.

"Are you, Catherine ? Is the ban, then, removed which excludes me from your dear society ?" asked Mr. Turville, earnestly.

She shook her head and walked slowly forwards.

"Are you happier, Catherine, since you sent me from you ?" demanded he, walking by her side, and gazing on her pale cheeks and brow.

"No, Charles."

"When will this mystery terminate, Catherine ? When do you expect Mr. Randolph in England ?" asked Mr. Turville, in his most immovable tones.

"Charles, you offend me greatly by persisting in talking to me in this strain. As you never heard the acknowledgment from my lips that Mr. Randolph is anything to me, you ought

not to assume it. Let us talk on some other subject," replied Lady Catherine, very gravely, with kindling cheek.

"No; let us converse on that subject which concerns us most, Catherine," replied Mr. Turville, firmly. "My conviction that, unfortunately, Mr. Randolph is not indifferent to you, is founded principally on your own manner; on the admissions which good Mrs. Otway occasionally drops; and, above all, on a conversation I had with Mrs. Rayland, supported and confirmed as it is by a letter I received a few days ago from Madame de Pezzaro——"

"But wherefore, and to what purpose, am I the object of all this *espionnage*, Mr. Turville? I never requested your interference, nor will I listen to its result," said Lady Catherine, angrily turning aside.

"I am well aware, Catherine, that my motives are liable to be construed by you into self-interested ones. However, had your love been given to any man who would have come forwards joyfully, proudly, to claim that precious gift, I could have resigned you: with a bitter pang, indeed, though one known only to my own heart; but when I see your health and spirits giving way under the burden of this *liaison* with some obscure, plausible adventurer, I must and will rescue you, even in defiance of your own commands."

"Enough, Mr. Turville. You have done your duty as my nearest relative; you have remonstrated: this is enough!" replied Lady Catherine, resentfully.

"No, not enough, Catherine, until I have convinced you. Your aunt has seen nothing more of Mr. Randolph; who, I understand, quitted Naples three weeks ago. She describes him as a man possessed of apparently great wealth and most insinuating manners; but carefully avoiding any allusion to his past career; never speaking of England, and holding aloof from men of his own outward station in life. More than this, dear cousin, from inquiries I have made, I feel a positive conviction that he really has no claim to the name of Randolph."

"This is too much! I positively forbid you, Charles, to address me in this language, or ever to allude in my presence to the name of Randolph. I will listen to no remonstrances from you on the subject!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, passionately, turning her flashing eyes on Mr. Turville, who continued walking calmly by her side.

"Your anger, Catherine, at hearing the truth, only shows me how much more deeply seated is the evil than I imagined. Forget now that I ever aspired to be other to you than your cousin and best friend, and believe my plain assertion that what I say relative to this destroyer of your peace,—this Mr. Randolph, is not the result of conjecture: it is fact; and who-

ever he may be, treat me he has no claim to the surname of Randolph," replied Mr. Turville, decisively.

And he spoke on surer grounds than his fair cousin imagined; for from the period his mind became slowly and unwillingly imbued with the conviction that her affection was lavished on an unworthy object, and that a promise, strong and binding, sealed her reluctant lips on all relating to this invisible lover, to effect her deliverance became Mr. Turville's all-absorbing desire. Little did Lady Catherine divine the incessant correspondence, wakeful nights, and even hurried journeys, which this anxiety prompted. Madame de Pezzaro was first roused from the soft, dreamy delights of her Italian villa, by her nephew's inquiries on the character and history of the gentleman she had introduced to her niece. Then followed investigations innumerable into the history, genealogy, and abode of all the Randolphs in the United Kingdom, assisted by county histories, directorics, and every other book likely to throw the faintest elucidation on the mystery. One of his numerous correspondents writing casually that a certain Gregory Randolph, residing in a small obscure town in the north, had just returned home from the continent, Mr. Turville put himself into the first train, and in a few hours found himself in the presence of a grave, caustic, middle-aged Scotchman, who bore the scrutiny to which he was first subjected with admirable *sang froid*, and repaid it by staring at his visitor with equal curiosity. Unsuccessful as he had been in discovering the identical personage he was in search of, Mr. Turville had become learned enough in the genealogical records of the Randolphs, to feel tolerably certain that no such individual as Madame de Pezzaro's guest could possibly claim the privilege of grafting, even as a collateral branch, on their family tree.

To assert that our heroine felt not a little doubt and *serrement de cœur* while listening to her cousin's earnest expostulation, would be to record her as something almost superhuman; but *love* soon came to her aid, and threw a roseate veil over all her scruples.

"Well, Charles, leave me to my destiny: whatever it may be, it has been my deliberate choice; and I am content—yes, content—to abide its issue," replied she, at length, in answer to his last observation; while a beautiful, trustful smile of hope lighted her countenance.

"Catherine, what can I say to rouse you to the folly, the madness of the course you are pursuing? You pine away daily under the burden of this secret, whatever may be its nature, imposed upon you by an unprincipled man, who, if he truly loved you, would never subject you to the misery you daily endure. Catherine, it must be something very

terrible which he would so carefully conceal from the guardian appointed by your father and all your friends ; and, fettered by this cruel promise, you will at length droop under its pressure. Speak dear, dear Catherine ! tell me what I can do, and I will serve you with the zeal of the most devoted brother."

"You can do nothing, Charles ; nothing. Have patience : one day I will explain all that appears so wilful, so inexplicable in my present conduct," rejoined Lady Catherine, while tears swam in her eyes.

"And, meanwhile, what will become of you, Catherine ?"

"Meanwhile, I shall try to learn submission to my lot. Indeed, Charles, I see so much misery of all kinds around me, that it almost teaches me to be satisfied with my fate, and to thank God that no worse has befallen me," replied she, with a melancholy smile.

Mr. Turville made no reply, and they continued walking on in silence. Lady Catherine, with her eyes bent to the ground, mused on many matters ; for the scene she had recently witnessed, and its impending catastrophe, intruded itself with strange perseverance, even in the midst of her own anxieties. More than once she determined to impart it to her cousin ; but the words were arrested on her lips by the reflection that she had no right to bruit into other ears, an occurrence that her intimacy with the family at Moreton had alone brought to her knowledge : and which they would most probably wish hushed up, in case the quarrel were adjusted. So, busy with her thoughts, she strolled along by her kind, true-hearted cousin's side, listlessly dragging the point of her parasol on the grass ; for one of those delightful brief intermissions in the steady glare of a summer's day, fell with reviving freshness on the plants and foliage around.

"Well, Catherine, as you refuse my aid, scorn my counsel, and banish me from Wardour, I shall make preparations for going abroad immediately. I will not stay to be a silent witness of the grief which is slowly destroying you," said Mr. Turville, in resolute tones.

"Nay, Charles, do not talk so. Do not let me add to my other anxieties, the bitter thought that I have driven you from home and country. O ! if you would but take my advice ; forget your ungrateful Cousin Catherine, and think somebody else could make you happier than she ever would——"

A bitter smile curled Mr. Turville's lip.

"Do you know anybody who would answer this purpose, Catherine ?" interrupted he.

"Yes, Maude Conway would," replied Lady Catherine, in low tones, turning away her head.

Mr. Turville's dark eyes were turned for a moment in derision, almost anger upon her.

"Thank you, Catherine. You, perhaps, think two crushed hearts might solace each other. But we are at your gate. I suppose I must not enter?"

Lady Catherine paused, tears stood in her eyes, yet she dare not bid her cousin enter. She felt that his attachment had not diminished by three weeks exile, and she detected the spark of hope which still lingered at his heart, in spite of her repeated assurances; and she silently held out her hand.

"And so Mr. Randolph has taken it into his head to be jealous of our intimacy? By my faith! 'tis the best trait I have yet heard of his character. Farewell, Catherine."

And Mr. Turville closed the gate, and without once venturing a glance at his cousin's sorrowful face, hurriedly retraced his steps.

CHAPTER XXV.

LADY CATHERINE RESISTS THE TEMPTER.

"ARE you tired with your walk, my dear? I fully expected Maude Conway would return with you. I hope you found her well?" said Mrs. Otway as Lady Catherine entered the room again.

"She will be here by-and-bye. But what have you been doing with yourself all this long morning?" asked Lady Catherine, quickly glancing round the room; for when she entered, Mrs. Otway was pacing up and down, and her knitting lay snugly deposited in its long wicker basket: a sure sign that the kind old lady laboured under some unusual mental excitement.

"I have been entertaining visitors for you, Catherine—Lord and Lady Alresford. The earl said, with that beautiful smile of his, that he could not drive away without shaking hands with me, when he heard that I was at home."

"No, I am sure he would not. What did you think of Lady Alresford? Did she make herself agreeable also?" asked Lady Catherine, untying her bonnet.

"Very, Catherine. I like her much better than I did. What a pretty creature she is to be sure! her teeth are transparent as pearls! I thought to myself, however, they looked more like a pair of lovers than husband and wife. She has such a strange shy way of glancing at him when his attention is attracted elsewhere; and then, if by chance their eyes meet, that beautiful colour of hers deepens——"

"Did Mildred leave any message for me?"

"Yes, my dear. She desired me to say she hoped you would return her visit very speedily. She repeated this message twice."

"I will go and see her to-morrow; that is, if poor dear Maude is in a condition to be left."

"Left! What do you mean, Catherine? Is there anything amiss with Maude Conway?"

"Sit down, dear Mrs. Otway, and I will relate the scene I witnessed at Moreton this morning, and then you will not think me perhaps the only unlucky person in the world;" and Lady Catherine briefly recounted what she had seen and heard.

"Good Heavens, what a dreadful affair!" exclaimed Mrs. Otway, lifting up her hands. "I am glad, poor young creature, she is coming here, out of the reach of her peevish ill-natured mother's tongue. Love is a very different thing to what it used to be in my days. Then it made people happy; now, as far as my experience and observation go, it produces quite an opposite effect. Poor Normanton! to think that he should get into this terrible mess as soon as he sets foot in England again! As a child he had always a fiery impetuous spirit. Poor fellow, if anything happens to him, Maude will never forgive herself to her dying day. How she ever could be mad enough to encourage that odious Colonel Sutherland! But here she comes," said Mrs. Otway, interrupting herself as a loud peal from the hall-door bell announced an arrival. "Fly, Catherine, my dear, and learn whether she has succeeded in her mission. I declare the shocking catastrophe has made every limb quake!"

In a minute, however, Miss Conway stood before them. Her face was still very pale, and no smile of hope, or comfort gladdened it. She was followed closely by Lady Emily Baynton; who, alarmed at her agitated state, had most kindly and considerately insisted on accompanying her back to Wardour Court.

Lady Catherine's heart sank with apprehension when she heard the very brief tidings they were able to impart; which amounted simply to the facts that Lord Normanton called at the Chantry, and after a short private interview with Sir Gerard, both gentlemen stepped into the carriage, and ordered the postillions to drive to Witham. All Sir Gerard intimated to his mother was, that an affair of importance would most probably detain him from home for a few days.

"How far is Witham from here, Maude?" asked Lady Catherine.

"About fifteen miles."

"You cannot do more, dear Maude. Tranquillise yourself with the thought that Gerard will employ every resource to bring this unhappy affair to an amicable termination," said Lady Emily, soothingly.

Maude's heart, however, refused to be thus consoled; she wept as one without hope. After Lady Emily's departure, everything was said and done which the tenderest affection could suggest; for Lady Catherine appeared to forget her own griefs in alleviating the sorrow of her friend. During that long, long afternoon, Maude wrote two letters, one to her brother, the other to Colonel Sutherland. In them she exhausted every argument, every entreaty, the liveliest feeling could prompt. She conjured them to reflect, ere they suffered a few hasty words to hurry them to the commission of a deed, which, if attended with fatal results, would embitter for ever the existence of the survivor. Her brother she passionately adjured to pardon the injury done her by Colonel Sutherland, even as she had forgiven it, and not to poison her future life with the agonising reflection that she had been his destroyer, or else that of the man once dear enough to be accepted as her intended husband. When these letters were dispatched, Maude felt more tranquillised. She wandered on the terrace, on the lawn, in the shrubberies, as restless fancy suggested; around were none but sympathising faces, and she felt the inestimable consolation of the kind, loving eyes bent upon her. The evening came, and wearied out with her long day of watching and excitement, Maude at length yielded to Mrs. Otway's importunity, and suffered herself to be carried off to bed in triumph by the good old lady; who, after she had comfortably laid her patient's aching head on the pillow, took a chair and stationed herself to watch beside her, until she slept.

Lady Catherine, meanwhile, remained passive, immersed in deep thought, for some time after her friend and Mrs. Otway quitted the room. Now that Maude was no longer present, and the task of consoling and comforting her friend ceased to divert her mind, the full tide of her own anxieties overpowered her. The day was drawing fast to its close, and as the light glided stealthily from the apartment, all around wore the gray, solemn chillness peculiar to an autumnal twilight. Lady Catherine sat with her elbow resting on the sofa cushion, and her face buried in her hand, heedless of the gathering gloom, until the cold breeze caused her to raise her head. Half shudderingly she arose with the intention of closing the windows, when the sombre aspect of the room seemed all at once to strike her: the thin muslin window-curtains shook and waved in the wind, which lightly drifted before it the fallen leaves on the terrace. A slight sensation of nervous dread overpowered her, as she glanced round the large, lonely room, and

then on the dark foliage without, heavy and indistinct in the mists of evening. She hastily closed the window, then, resolved to subdue her involuntary tremor, she sat down before the piano. Her fingers wandered over the keys for a few seconds, but the sounds grated on her ear: their tone was too light and joyous, and harmonised little with the solemn stillness around, or with the sadness weighing on her spirits.

Again Lady Catherine arose, and lighting a taper quitted the room. She crossed the hall, and traversed with a quick step several ancient walled passages, which at length brought her to a door opening on a small flagged court. Opposite arose a low Gothic building, covered with ivy, entered by a deep stone porch. Lady Catherine paused, and took down a key, suspended on a nail just within the passage doorway, then drawing her scarf tightly round her figure, she crossed the little court. The taper flickered as the light wind blew; but hastily she threw open the small door under the porch, and soon stood within a spacious apartment, which had formerly served her ancestors—who all, late as two generations back, professed the Romish faith—as a chapel. Lady Catherine possessed too reverent and devout a mind, to devote to secular purposes what had once been consecrated to God; consequently, the chapel, divested of its tawdry frippery, continued to serve as a place for the household to assemble in at morning prayer. The rich painted glass windows, however, still threw their glowing hues on the pavement, and the organ which had led the devotions of her ancestors yet occupied its wonted recess, near the spot where formerly the altar reared its gorgeous splendour. Lady Catherine closed the door, and approaching the organ, lighted its two wax-tapers. She then turned, and took a short rapid glance round the apartment; for, although in the constant habit of whiling away the evening in playing upon the noble instrument before her, a feeling of nervous dread was still paramount. The opposite row of windows opened on the terrace; for the small ivy-covered chapel, with its tiny tower, formed a most picturesque termination to the noble range appertaining to the mansion.

The possession of this organ had proved one of Lady Catherine's greatest solaces since her return from the continent. When her spirit was dark within her, the solemn melody soothed its gloom and irritability, and often she played until her fingers fell powerless from the keys, and she wept tears of unspeakable relief. She now again turned towards the instrument, and seating herself, opened the music on the desk before her. It was Mozart's Twelfth Mass; and the chords, grand, majestic, and harmonious, soon filled the apartment, rolling away in deep, massive surges of sound, vibrating

on the soft night air. She played, and her spirit grew brighter within her; the glorious inspirations of the great composer seemed to kindle a corresponding spark in her own enthusiastic mind. The concluding notes of the sublime "*Quoniam tu solus sanctus*" died away, and she sat listening with solemn awe to the profound hush which all at once prevailed, when a sharp sound, as of leaves flapping against the window, caused her to start, and glance hurriedly around. The gloom had deepened, save just around the spot where the candles threw their feeble glare. She struck another chord, but ere the sound melted away the sash of the painted window immediately opposite, which opened like a door on the terrace, was pushed back, and some one entered the apartment, and advanced towards her. Lady Catherine did not scream: she stood mute and pale, awaiting what next should befall her. Slowly the intruder let fall the cape of the cloak which enveloped his figure. A cry of joy escaped her lips, as she presently bounded forwards and flung herself into the arms extended towards her. Mr. Randolph, for it was he, folded her to his heart, and passionately kissed her pale lips and forehead.

"Catherine, my best beloved, it rejoices you then to see me? You are faithful—faithful in spirit to your vow?" said he.

She slowly raised her head from his bosom, and her beautiful eyes fixed themselves with an earnest, almost painful expression on his.

"Did you ever sincerely doubt me, Frederick? Could you believe me false—false to the love my own lips owned, my own will ratified? Speak! did you think so lightly of me?"

"Not till I had seen another usurp a privilege mine only, Catherine; till then, I refused to believe."

"Oh, Frederick, if, indeed, you witnessed this, you must also have heard me spurn Charles Turville's proffered love."

"I heard nothing, my Catherine; the sight nearly maddened me."

"But where were you, Frederick? And how came you at Nethercote?"

"In the wood immediately opposite. I had watched and followed your steps, Catherine. Had Mr. Turville delayed another instant he would have found me at your feet."

"Has this shadow now passed for ever from your mind, Frederick? Do you believe that Charles Turville has never caused me to swerve from the fidelity I vowed to you? Answer me truly!" and Lady Catherine's eyes rested upon him with an intensity as if she would read his soul.

"I believe you, my Catherine—believe you to be faithful, noble, and true!" replied Mr. Randolph, fondly kissing her crimsoned cheek.

"Oh, was it then for this chimera, this cruel doubt, that you

violated your solemn promise to be with me two months past—then to avow our marriage, and release me from the necessity of deceiving those who have so firm a trust in my truth and honour? Oh, Frederick, you have cruelly abused your power over me!” exclaimed Lady Catherine, in a tone of sorrowful reproach.

“No, Catherine, on the day I promised to be with you, I set my foot on English ground; but it had been insidiously whispered in my ear, before I quitted Italy, that the proud heiress of Wardour encouraged the addresses of her cousin. I spurned the report with indignation. Catherine, I flew to clasp you in my arms, to proclaim you mine, and found my supposed rival at your feet. Is this no palliation, my beloved one? I determined to solve my bitter doubts. Could I thus hold you to my heart and call you mine, my own Catherine, had I suffered a single misgiving to mar the bliss of our meeting?”

Then is it to redeem your promise that you are here—to tell me to whom I have vowed everlasting love? Dear Frederick, let mystery now cease between us, I implore you.”

“Catherine, will you hate me—will you cast me for ever from your precious affection, when I tell you that I cannot yet make this revelation? Even since the short period I have been in England a fresh obstacle has arisen. I dare not yet claim you. Catherine, turn not aside. God grant that the impediment to which I allude may be but temporary! In a few days I will return, dearest, to kneel to you, to make you mine!” said Mr. Randolph, speaking rapidly and passionately.

She started from his arms, and stood before him. The light glimmered on her features—they were pale as her white gown.

“A few days!” rejoined she, speaking in a tone of suppressed emotion, and her lip curled with a bitter smile; “a few days! Think, Frederick, how many have passed in the keen misery of fallacious hope since last we met. Let me know this obstacle. Let me share your anxieties. Frederick, if you value my peace, if you would not have me repent the deed which now links me to your fate, tell me everything.”

“I cannot. To reveal the obstacle which for the present seals my lips would be to heap misery and suspense, surpassing even what you have already endured for my sake. Believe me: trust me yet a few days, and all may yet be well. Say, my Catherine, that you will have patience.”

She slowly averted her head, and her full lip quivered. Mr. Randolph threw himself into a chair. Lady Catherine contemplated him in silence for a few seconds.

“Frederick, you are moved!” exclaimed she, seizing his hand. “I will not have patience. If such a fearful ordeal as

you describe awaits you, it is meet that I, your wife, should stand by your side. Frederick, dear Frederick, explain this mystery!" said she, in a voice of passionate emotion.

The uncertain light glanced on her white dress, and on her cheek bedewed with tears, as she hid her face on his bosom.

"No, ask me not, Catherine. Never will I doom you to this suspense!" said Mr. Randolph, passionately kissing away her tears.

"Hear me," continued Lady Catherine almost sternly. "Is it any obstacle of birth, wealth, or position, which deters you from doing this most righteous act of acknowledging our marriage? Only say so, Frederick, and this very evening I take you by the hand and present you to my household as its master!"

"Catherine, your noble words would make me, were it possible, worship you more madly still. Fear not; your friends will never have reason to blush for your choice: nor surely will you, my beloved, still refuse credit to my solemn assurance, that 'tis not a selfish scruple which induces me to implore your patience a little space longer. If we are spared to meet again, my Catherine, our next interview shall explain everything; you shall judge me, sweet one, and never will delinquent submit more submissively to any sentence than I will then to yours," said Mr. Randolph, earnestly.

"But to lose you again—to be plunged into the same miserable doubt and uncertainty—to feel almost criminal in the presence of others! Oh, Frederick! must this anguish again be mine? I gave you my faith under circumstances almost unparalleled. Does not such a trust demand some return on your part? Why will you overwhelm me with shame and confusion? Why render our union, which nobody has a right to contest, a clandestine intrigue? Oh, Frederick! dear Frederick! think again. In heart and soul, under whatever circumstances, I am yours! What, then, do you fear?" and Lady Catherine knelt before him, her beautiful face now flushing, now pale with excitement. The tears which a few moments ago streamed plentifully down her hot cheeks, were suddenly arrested, and her figure trembled with intense emotion. Never, in her day of proudest triumph, had she boasted of more beauty. Suddenly she felt herself caught in his strong embrace.

"My own Catherine! my wife! I will not mock you with the vain question whether you love me well enough to sacrifice something yet for my sake. Yes, you shall share my secret. Consent to this one alternative,—be mine! Fly with me; and ere sunrise you shall know the whole of my brief history. My best beloved, it is only when assured of the privilege of watching over you that I dare reveal the ordeal which now impends."

For a brief second after he ceased speaking she was silent, the quick heaving of her bosom alone testifying the conflict in her mind. Mr. Randolph pressed his lips to her brow, her cheeks—she hurriedly started from him. There was a desperate tranquillity in her manner, and a tremulousness in her tones as she spoke, which caused him to raise his eyes anxiously to her face.

"Fly with you! Why, and from whom should I fly, Frederick? What is there to control my actions, save religion and virtue? Acknowledge our marriage, and to-morrow I follow you wherever you will!"

"I have before told you that I cannot at present do this, Catherine; though it may be a very, very brief period ere I claim you openly as my wife. My honour, which ought to be dear to you as your own, Catherine, forbids the immediate avowal of our marriage. Oh, yield then to my prayer: come with me! share my anxieties, and be to me, my beloved, more than ever the fairest creations of fancy pictured."

"What madness possesses you, Frederick? Would you throw from you the most precious dowry I can bring—your wife's reputation? Shall I also suffer even a temporary stain to rest on my own noble line—the first of my race who dishonoured the name of Neville? Never! never! Tempt me no more! Go! do your duty—that duty you tell me which supersedes the most solemn vow human lips can utter! I can suffer still!" and she turned away and rested her throbbing temples on the keys of the organ.

Mr. Randolph paced up and down the apartment several times; he at length returned to her side.

"You are right. Forget my mad proposal, Catherine, and forgive me all the sorrow I heap upon your head. Catherine! I was once a sceptic in woman's faith, in woman's disinterested love; your noble devotion has made a convert of me," said Mr. Randolph, in a voice of deep emotion, bending over her.

"Never to distrust me again—never?" asked she, in a low unsteady tone.

"Never!"

She raised her eyes, swimming in tears; a smile, bright and fleeting as an April gleam, passed over her face.

"Not even if I readmit poor Charles Turville to all his accustomed privileges at Wardour?"

"Not even then."

There was a pause of some minutes. Mr. Randolph clasped his cloak. Lady Catherine shuddered.

"When shall I see you again?" murmured she, faintly.

"Expect me in three or four days: but oh, Catherine! if within this time I should not fulfil my promise, think not

hardly of me—and now farewell, my own!—one parting embrace!”

She flung herself into his arms.

“Oh, tell me again, Frederick: renew the assurance that our next interview terminates this suspense which is destroying me. Nay, even now let me know this secret; for the most piercing anguish were better than delay, however brief!” exclaimed she, in a voice broken by deep sobs.

“What shall I say? Catherine, this distress is more than I can bear. Do you repent your decision? Come with me then to part no more!”

She shook her head. Suddenly a gleam of hope sparkled in her eye. She turned eagerly towards him.

“Frederick! where would you take me?” asked she.

“To that home, Catherine, to which I would lead my wife, were her hand placed in mine by her father’s representative,” replied Mr. Randolph, after a pause.

She saw that he evaded her inquiry. There was a long, a bitter silence: at length she raised her head.

“Farewell, Frederick! go now! This parting is bitter—it must be—let us no longer delay it!” and Lady Catherine turned away, and taking up one of the tapers, unfalteringly approached the door.

Once more she turned. Mr. Randolph stood with the most intense sorrow imprinted on his face. He caught her look of deep affection, and mingled regret and pity.

“Catherine, leave me not!” exclaimed he, springing towards her; but in another second she was gone, and the heavy door closed.

She fled from temptation!

CHAPTER XXVI.

SECRETS OF THE GOLDEN HEART.

"SEE, Mildred, I have just received this letter from Lord Elvaston. He and your mother purpose visiting Amesbury next week," said Lord Alresford, one morning putting a letter into his wife's hand.

A joyful smile lighted up Mildred's face.

"You wrote to beg them to come here, I see, *en route* to Brighton, Lord Alresford. How kind of you to prepare for me this pleasant and very unexpected happiness," said she, raising her eyes from the eager perusal of her father's letter.

"Dear, dear mamma, what joy to see you again!"

"Lady Elvaston will equally rejoice, Mildred. I can imagine her delight. This is Friday; they arrive on Wednesday, you see; so in four days they will be with you."

"But Helen,—dear Helen,—papa does not mention her in his letter," said Mildred, hesitatingly.

"Would you like to ask Miss Campbell to accompany your mother, Mildred?"

"Oh, so very much! In the society of dear papa, mamma, and Helen, my happiness, indeed, will be complete," replied she, eagerly.

Had not Mildred been absorbed in the prospect of reunion with those she loved so well, she would have noted the momentary disappointment and chagrin which swept over her husband's expressive features, as he gazed on the changeful hues of her cheek and the sparkling animation of her eye and manner. Yes, she was glad, inexpressibly glad, to clasp those dear ones in her arms again: but, could he have read the workings of her heart, he would have seen and compared her joy to the eddying circles on the bosom of some deep pool or lake, which playfully ripple and kiss the bright sunbeam, while the sombre waters beneath slumber on in heavy, unruffled gloom.

"Write, then, dear Mildred, and invite your friend, if it will make you so very happy. I am going to Avington this morning, and if you will do so immediately, I can post your note, and Miss Campbell will get it earlier than if it went by the bag this evening," and Lord Alresford rose, and taking an inkstand and writing-case from a distant table, placed them before her.

Mildred's eyes mutely thanked him as she took up the pen and commenced writing. One small page was quickly filled,

and then she paused to consider; for there was an uncomfortable sensation on her spirits, slight though it was, that acted as a drawback on the pleasurable feeling with which she summoned her friend to her new home. The source of her discomfort soon resolved itself into the tone in which the earl had bidden her write to Helen. Her feminine instinct told her that though he had given a cordial permission, there was some *arrière pensée*, which lingered and grated unpleasantly on his feelings. She laid down her pen, and looked towards him. He was lounging on the sofa reading a newspaper, which concealed his face. In days of yore, had anybody predicted to Mildred that concern for the earl's sentiments would make her pause in the delightful task of summoning Helen Campbell to her side, how incredulous would have been her smile!

"Lord Alresford, are you quite sure that you approve of my inviting Helen to spend some time here? Remember the mystic four months are not quite expired," said she, at length, timidly, with a faint smile.

"I shall be very glad to see Miss Campbell. I like what little I know of her; and you are aware, Mildred, it was not that I objected to her intimacy with you, which induced me to request you to postpone your invitation," replied the earl; then, after a pause, he added, "what made you imagine my assent was not a hearty one, Mildred?"

"Oh, I don't know, it was a fancy," rejoined she, assiduously resuming her pen. "I imagine Sir Gerard Baynton will feel as much obliged to you as myself for the summons which brings Helen Campbell to Amesbury," continued she quickly, for the sake of saying something to divert the earl's attention from herself.

"I strongly advise you, Mildred, not to interfere between Sir Gerard and your friend. Experience shows that in such cases the intervention of a third party almost always does injury. If Baynton be really attached to Miss Campbell, which I can scarcely credit, leave him to manage his own affairs."

"But if Sir Gerard should be tempted to forget the trifling inequality of station, Lord Alresford, in admiration of Helen's noble character, promise me that you will not combat his wishes; for I know you have great influence with him."

"I certainly will not interfere to thwart his inclinations, especially if Helen Campbell returns his affection purely and disinterestedly. But what a long epistle you are writing! ah, I see, Mildred, you are a good correspondent when you choose. I wonder whether you ever neglected to answer any of Miss Campbell's letters. May I read?" said Lord Alresford, carelessly taking up the sheets she had rapidly filled: for during the preceding conversation her pen had been busy, though her thoughts wandered elsewhere.

"Certainly," replied she, colouring : not for what she had written, for Lord Alresford's name was not mentioned in her page, but that her omissions in the affair of the two Venice letters recurred vividly to her mind.

Lord Alresford presently gave back the tiny sheets, without comment. Why did he ask to read her letter? Was it an *épreuve* of her sentiments that he wished to make? Her clear eye lingered on his in search of an explanation; but as he offered none, after a short pause, she folded her note, sealed, directed it, and in a few minutes the earl rose and left the room.

The next few days passed rapidly away, and yet, spite of her joyous anticipations, it was with a sigh Mildred arose on the morning of her parents' and Helen's expected arrival, and thought that all her pleasant *tête-à-tête* walks and evenings with her husband must be suspended. She was beginning so to love and prize his society, that the time she now spent with him was looked forward to and anticipated as the happiest portion of the day; and her heart throbbed with a pang of impatience when she reflected that, for many weeks to come she should only listen to his voice in public, and that others must necessarily divide with her his attention and conversation. Scrupulously now did she fulfil all her outward duties: she walked with him, visited his tenantry, was ever at her post in the drawing-room, seldom secluded herself, and an indescribable feeling of irritation took possession of her, that all these varied employments were about to be shared by others, though even by her parents. During the morning she wandered around the rooms, the gardens, and her own boudoir, in a state of restless disquietude. She longed to be with her husband; but according to his usual practice, the earl spent the morning in the library, and she had never yet ventured to intrude on his retirement. How contrary was all this to the anticipated rapture of her meeting with her father, her mother, and Helen! And yet even now two wills, two natures, seemed to animate her bosom; and sometimes her heart beat with delight at the thought of welcoming them, and showing all the beautiful things, all the luxuries she was mistress of. As for Aglaë, she was wild with delight at the prospect of seeing her former mistress and Miss Helen again; *cette chère dame, et Mademoiselle* would soon make *milédi* smile again, was her sanguine thought, as she looked on Mildred's anxious brow.

About half-past five in the evening, Lord and Lady Elvaston arrived. Mildred laughed and wept by turns, as she felt the arms of her gentle mother encircle her, and heard her softly murmured words of affection and love, and then passed from her embrace to fall on the neck of her father and Helen. For the moment all her sorrows and anxieties appeared lost in the

miss of being the object of so much affection ; but soon her gaze wandered, even from her loved mother's face, in search of her husband. He was standing near, and immediately approached and spoke to her. Lady Elvaston listened attentively, and a brighter smile stole over her features. Who cannot imagine the joyful alacrity with which Lady Alresford presently escorted her mother and Helen to their rooms ; the hurried endearments which were there again interchanged ; the brief, broken queries ; the anxious comments on her pale brow and flushing cheeks ; and Mildred's hasty, unsatisfactory answers, and her flight before this storm of questions, to snatch, if possible, one short fragment of repose before dinner, in the seclusion of her own apartment ? She there flung herself on a couch, and her overwrought spirit relieved itself in tears. She dreaded her mother's rigid scrutiny, for she felt that to her own heart alone could her present position be defined ; and yet she was conscious some explanation must be given, else how could she reconcile the distance between herself and the earl, which Lady Elvaston's watchful eye would not fail to detect, with the repeated assurance she had given, that she was content, satisfied with her lot. She knew, also, that Aglaë's zeal would outstrip her discretion ; and that, in her anxiety to do her service, she would pour all the past, which had fallen under her personal observation, into Lady Elvaston's ear ; and Mildred was too proud to prohibit such a recital. Not that she wished her faults and follies concealed from her mother's knowledge ; but there was something sacred in the feelings which agitated her heart : feelings that, under the conviction of her husband's indifference, she would rather confide to Helen's safe keeping than to her mother ; who, from her age and position, might conceive herself privileged to afford the earl a clearer insight into her daughter's sentiments than Mildred's pride could anticipate with composure.

For the present moment, however, Mildred dismissed her uncomfortable cogitations, and commenced the important process of dressing ; and soon, with her beautiful face beaming with smiles, she was seated by her father's side ; who, according to custom, had used such celerity in the various operations of his toilette, as to be down considerably before the rest of the party. The earl, Lady Elvaston, and Helen soon followed. The latter was in raptures with all she saw, and laughingly declared that the splendours of Amesbury did more justice to Mrs. Wedderbourne's descriptive powers, than the stately old lady's usual narratives of the wonders she witnessed in her varied peregrinations.

Immediately after tea Lady Elvaston, fatigued by her long journey, arose to retire for the night. Her daughter and Helen

accompanied her to her room ; but, tired and weary, she speedily dismissed them both. As soon as Lady Elvaston's door closed behind them, Mildred twined her arm round Helen's waist and led the way to her boudoir.

"Here, my darling, my precious Helen, sit down, and let me look at you and rejoice at having found you again. I feel I have not half greeted you as I ought. Oh! Helen, the inexpressible comfort you would have been to me during these past months! You would have built up my wavering resolutions, and made me think as I do now, without the bitter anguish and regret of past experiences," exclaimed she, flinging her arms round Helen's neck.

"Do not speak so bitterly, my own Mildred. Your past experiences, as you call them, will probably be of more permanent benefit to you than all the advice either I or all the world could give. This pale brow tells me, though, that you have suffered more than your letters expressed," replied Helen, fondly returning her friend's caress.

"Suffered! Helen, suffering is too feeble a word to express all I have endured, and still endure. Do you not remember our conversation on my wedding-day? Helen, the anguish I anticipated has been realised: yes, more than realised; and your prediction remains yet unaccomplished," exclaimed she, passionately.

"But how is this? I remarked to-day with the utmost joy, the excellent outward understanding between yourself and Lord Alresford. Surely, surely, my darling Mildred, you are not suffering the false pride which actuated you before your marriage still to shadow your happiness!" exclaimed Helen, in a voice of unfeigned consternation.

"Our present position — what can I liken it to, Helen? I will tell you. It is a fair outside, devoid of inward substance: a nut without a kernel; a state, false, unnatural, hollow; a semblance of reality, which the first and most fragile obstacle would dissipate like vapour before the wind. But, Helen," continued she, after a pause of a second, "do not think I am going to torment you to-night, with a detail of my grievances: I only want you to look round my fairy palace, and then you shall be dismissed, dearest, to sleep off your fatigues."

"Mildred, surely you exaggerate," replied Helen, decisively, without heeding her latter words. "If all were as hollow as you represent, I am firmly persuaded that the earl never would have made you his wife. Nothing shall ever convince me that *he* has not truth and reality on his side, whatever may be the misunderstandings your jealous dread of unasked-for concession involves."

"Lady Emily Baynton tried to encourage me with some-

thing of the same assurance ; but then, Helen, comes the bitter thought to waft it away that it was I who demanded the fulfilment of our contract. Lord Alresford, in his first letter, tacitly relinquished his claim. I appealed to his honour, and he gave me his hand ; but were the opportunity to come over again, I would act in the same manner. Ah, Helen, your married life will not be so stormy a one as mine. Should you become Sir Gerard's wife, your prudent firmness will save you from the shoals on which my happiness has been wrecked. You will also have another aid denied to me : for Sir Gerard's character is more open, more easily read and learned, than Lord Alresford's."

"Mildred, now I am come to visit you, you must positively not encourage any such delusive hopes. Until Sir Gerard Baynton gives me some surer sign of preference than mere admiration, I do not let my mind dwell on what I feel would be too great happiness for me to expect. Sir Gerard's wife ought to be a person of much higher consequence than myself, and it would not be a sign of the great wisdom you are pleased to attribute to me, to cherish thoughts which grow only to sting the unrestrained imagination that gave them birth," replied Helen, with a quiet smile.

"Well, Helen, we won't discuss Sir Gerard more at present, only I will give you this piece of information, that we expect him here with Lady Emily next week. Now, look round ; not one word of admiration have I received as yet for my bower !"

"'Tis a shrine fit for a Peri ! will that do, Mildred ?" replied Helen, laughingly, rising, and with her arm linked within her friend's, she wandered round the exquisite little apartment.

"Scarcely," replied Mildred. "I expect your admiration will be far more exuberant to-morrow morning, when daylight reveals all its beauties, and you see my parterres and fountain. To please me, Lord Alresford seems to have anticipated every wish the most lavish luxury could devise. Oh, Helen, he only withholds what would give life and value to his innumerable gifts."

"Well, I shall not give implicit credence to this assertion of yours, until my own eyes have witnessed its truth. Do you know, you strongly remind me of the child in the old story-book, who trembled and dared not for a long time put out his hand and boldly seize his cake, because it was stuck with almonds and made to look formidable like a porcupine. Now, in my opinion, Mildred, had you courage to grapple with these terrible difficulties of yours, you would find them imaginary as the child's fears," said Helen, taking up one pretty thing and then another from the table against which they stood. "What

a superb-looking book," continued she, presently approaching a small stand, on which lay a large volume, beautifully bound in vellum, closed with a small gold padlock in the shape of a heart, studded with precious stones.

"This book has been my great consolation in my solitary hours, Helen," replied Mildred. "I have noted in it every event since I left home; and a sad record of faults and follies it is," continued she, turning over the pages. "You shall be initiated into its mysteries some day, Helen!"

"Why not now, dear Mildred? It will spare you the pain and trouble of relating the history of the past four months," replied Helen, glancing with intense interest on the close manuscript pages.

Lady Alresford closed the book, and for a minute appeared irresolute.

"Well, Helen, you shall take it with you to your room; on condition that you will sacredly, jealously guard its contents from every eye save your own, and return it to me to-morrow evening. I shall be happier, I think, when you know the history of all my misdeeds; though do not let me quite lose your good opinion, my Helen," said she, placing the book in Miss Campbell's hand, while tears gathered in her eyes.

"I am too sensible of my own failings to condemn others; and least of all you, Mildred," replied Helen, affectionately.

"Ah, Helen, your affection for me renders you lenient to my faults; though I fear that journal will make revelations of incredible folly, astounding even to your forbearance. Let me show you, however, how to possess yourself of my secrets; for that little golden heart locks them up securely as my own, and only yields its treasure to the initiated. You see that small turquoise flower—lightly press its anthers together, and the book unfolds its pages to you, Helen. Now, try if you understand the spring."

"Yes. It opens perfectly. What a very ingenious contrivance!" exclaimed Helen, as her white fingers quickly detached the tiny heart.

"I hear Aglaë's step in the next room; so she shall go with you now. She made it her especial request that she might be permitted to wait on dear mamma the night of her arrival. But come, first, Helen, and see how magnificently I am lodged," said Lady Alresford, entering her bed-chamber.

Helen surveyed, with some wonder and curiosity, the large, lofty apartment into which her friend led her, with its stately bed and rich velvet hangings, its tall pier-glasses, and profusion of chairs, tables, couches, and china; its luxurious toilette and tall blazing lights, ready to illumine the *coucher* of the fair young girl by her side, who stood laughingly watching her movements. Helen, however, thought to her-

self that were the choice hers, she should still much prefer her own snug little apartment at home, with its white toilette and simple tent bed, to all this splendour; and some such opinion she expressed.

"And so I think also, Helen; and even in my most melancholy moods am sometimes tempted to laugh outright, when I look round on all this *appareil*; but Lord Alresford said this was my apartment, so, *ma chère, il n'y avait pas à redire!*" said Mildred, as she kissed and took leave of her friend for the night.

Eager to commence the perusal of the manuscript, Helen, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, quickly dismissed Aglaë, and comfortably wrapped in her dressing-gown, she threw herself into an arm chair, and opened the precious volume. She read, and as her eye glanced over page after page, her eloquent features expressed sorrow, pity, and sympathy. Many of the entries were written in a short hurried hand, and the page blistered with tears. Helen's cheek flushed with anger and indignation, as she learned all her friend had suffered from Colonel Sutherland's treachery: and her breath came quick and fast as she read Mildred's ingenuous detail of her subsequent interview with her husband; not a single fact, however criminating to herself, had she omitted; and Helen's tears flowed as she read her despairing self-accusations. Without equivocation, or an attempt to justify her conduct, she had sincerely recorded the facts of each day as they occurred; and Helen felt, that, however greatly the want of moral firmness was to be deplored in Mildred's character, no one could peruse her frank avowals of past error, and of deep affection for her husband, without esteeming and loving her in a tenfold degree for her noble struggles and aspirations after good.

We will transcribe, for the reader's edification, a few passages from our heroine's journal. The following entry was made about a fortnight before Helen's arrival:—

"Tuesday, September 5.—Rose at my usual hour, restless and languid. Breakfast passed without any remarkable incident. Lord Alresford was silent, and I in no mood to exert myself. There is surely something strange and artificial in the existence I now lead. My words and actions rouse no responsive chord within my own heart. Nothing kindles interest, and I weary of myself and all the world. I had read of such feelings, and now I sometimes smile to think how eloquently I could descant on the subject—I, whom all the world thinks a personage so very prosperous and happy. I wonder whether Lord A. ever guesses at what is passing in my mind? Sometimes, after an involuntary fit of abstraction, I turn and find his eyes riveted upon me with a kind of moody expression on

his brow. I suppose he is weary of so dull and taciturn a companion ; as he invariably then proposes to read. Ah ! if the book might be his heart ! for, ever since my last unfortunate attempt at explanation, after our ride to the Chauntry, he has been so cold, so reserved, though at the same time so very kind and considerate, that I cannot help accusing myself of ingratitude and captiousness in finding fault at all. But, patience ! the legend on my coat of arms ought to be Queen Mary's famous motto, 'Time unveils Truth ;' and one day or another my husband will know how dearly I would have prized his affection. Breakfast over, after wandering round the garden, I sat down and read Racine's 'Mithridate.' French heroes and heroines never speak the language of love. No matter of what nation, language, and people—Jews, Turks, or Christians—they entertain each other with the same grand set speeches, commencing with the eternal 'Monsieur,' or 'Madame ;' just as some antiquated beau and belle, with hoop and fan, periwig, and *chapeau à bras*, might have bowed, courtesied, and made love, some century and a half ago, on the grand terrace at Versailles. However, at luncheon I heartily wished for a little of the phlegm and insensibility of Racine's heroines, when a note arrived for Lord Alresford from War-dour Court.

He just glanced it over, and laid it beside his plate, and then presently arose to deliver a message himself to the groom who rode over with it. When he returned he told me shortly that business of importance for Lady Catherine Neville would prevent him walking with me ; and with this abrupt notification he left the room. I felt piqued, cut to the heart, and made a hasty retreat to the drawing-room, where I busied myself in arranging a basket of flowers just sent in by the gardener. Presently Lord A. entered. He stood by me for a little time watching my movements. I did not speak ; I could not : a choking sensation seemed to take away my utterance.

"Mildred," said he, at length, 'why are you so grave ?'

"I did not answer, and I fear rebellious tears stood in my eyes.

"When shall we understand each other, Mildred ?' resumed the earl, with increased severity of tone. 'You feel yourself aggrieved, and justly so, at my excusing myself as your companion this afternoon, without assigning a suitable cause ; and yet you did not ask me for an explanation. I read immediately what was passing in your mind, but resolved to try whether you would be candid enough to express it. Here is Lady Catherine's letter ; for, in spite of your assumed indifference, you cannot deny that I have rightly interpreted your feelings. Oh ! Mildred, reflect how precarious must ever

be our good understanding if you persist in this culpable dissimulation!"

He then laid the letter on the table and quitted the room.

"Was this rebuke merited? Lord Alresford accuse *me* of indifference! If he only knew the deep, deep love and reverence I bear him, and that not one thought of my erring heart would I—now if assured of his affection—voluntarily withhold! But it is too late. I must pay the penalty of my past folly, and submit as well as I may to a life loveless and solitary."

"Friday, September 8.—Lady Catherine Neville and her friend Mrs. Otway paid me a visit to-day. What a strange, impulsive, fascinating being Lady Catherine is! When she raises those dark, flashing-looking eyes, language the most persuasive and eloquent appears to speak in her glance. Her voice too, at once so soft and melodious, so impassioned and earnest when warmed by her subject, accords with the almost Eastern voluptuous beauty of her face and figure. She talks upon all subjects with infinite point and shrewdness. She has evidently read and seen a great deal, and her talents are of the very first-rate order. Her manner to the earl is a strange mixture of playful defiance and submissive deference. She evidently has the highest opinion of his judgment, and sets the utmost value on his approbation. The more I see of her, the less reason do I think I have for entertaining the idea which makes me so very miserable, that she wished to exchange his guardianship for a dearer connection. Her manner when speaking to him is totally disembarassed, and Lord Alresford, on his part, talks and laughs with all the ease and familiarity of old acquaintance. He cannot love her. *I* could not talk so to him; for if he be not indifferent, his case must be parallel with mine. *Je reviens un peu de mon premier idée!* but what matters it if, while groping about in the dark to avoid an imaginary peril, I have as entirely lost my husband's heart? Lord A. gave her ladyship a very pressing invitation to visit us in the course of a week or two; which, of course, I was compelled to second, so I shall have opportunity for observation. Should, then, my fast-fading doubts resolve themselves into realities? but no, I cannot contemplate the agony, the torture such certainty would bring. God alone could support me under an ordeal so fearful,—that blight of loving with all the spirit's energy, to reap despair! better, far better, the silence of the grave! At times, also, I have remarked a change sweep over Lady Catherine's lovely features. Has some poisoned fang insidiously pierced *her* happiness likewise? Once or twice in my presence her light laughter has been arrested, and her smiles have disappeared like bright sun-rays behind some ominous thunder-cloud. I shall observe,

compare, and judge impartially ; and the event of the next few months will cast its shadow, for good or evil, over my future life. Well may I supplicate for a favourable issue !

"The only scrap of conversation with Lady Catherine I think worth recording, is, that she informed me Mrs. St. Priest is gone to visit a friend in Paris, and would be absent four months. Be this as it may, she shall never more have opportunity to play off her dangerous wiles upon me ; as I fully coincide with Lord Alresford's desire, and intend to drop her acquaintance altogether. Her very name makes me shudder, and recalls the precipice, on the verge of which, the firmness and forbearance of my husband alone rescued me."

Then came a few brief lines. The character was wavering and trembling, and many of the words blotted by tears.

"Saturday evening.—To-day all has been dark, cold, dreary, as the white shivering mists, which even now as I write gather and roll over the distant landscape. I have unwittingly displeased my husband—how, I know not. Kind and courteous as ever, yet throughout the day there has been a reserve, a reproach, in his manner which has almost broken my heart. Twenty times he has addressed me as 'Lady Alresford ;' and no one can imagine the freezing, cutting accent with which these words leave his lips. God grant me patience !"

The last record in Mildred's diary, every word of which Helen read ere she laid her head on her pillow, was the following, written the evening before Lord and Lady Elvaston's arrival.

"Tuesday.—I have now to record a narrow escape which happened to me this morning ; an escape, from the humiliating consequences of which I still tremble, though preserved. After breakfast, having seen Lord Alresford set out on horseback for Avington, I came to my room, and wishing to make some little alterations in this journal, I drew my writing-table near the window, and soon became absorbed in my employment. Aglaë, who is absolutely frantic with joy at the prospect of seeing dear mamma and having the house filled with company meanwhile, was busily engaged in the adjoining dressing-room in bringing to light a quantity of my wedding finery ; which, ever since that momentous event, has slumbered in peaceful oblivion on the shelves of my wardrobe. I suppose I must have been occupied with my pen about an hour and a half, when she clamorously besought me to inspect a new *garmiture* which she pronounced *parfaite* and *charmante* ; and, accordingly, to get rid of her importunity, I followed her into the dressing-room, leaving my book wide open on the table. I could not have been absent more than five minutes, when, to my unspeakable horror and dismay, I heard a step in the boudoir. I flew, rather than walked

back, and my consternation was not diminished when I saw Lord Alresford standing near the table! I felt my cheek flush crimson. Luckily, there was very little written on the page, and in rising my pocket handkerchief had fallen and concealed even most of that; but, instead of taking the matter coolly, I advanced, and, like a simpleton, confusedly closed the book; and then, doubtless, stood like a culprit with downcast eyes, awaiting my doom; for I felt unspeakably embarrassed. I was conscious that Lord Alresford's calm, steady, inquiring gaze was upon me—yet I was silent; for an explanation would have entailed the evil I sought so awkwardly to avert.

"I merely intruded, Mildred, to give you a letter bearing the Stanmore postmark which I brought with me from Avington. I am sorry to have interrupted your occupation," said he, at last, in those cold, measured tones I so dread. He then, with his look of most lofty nonchalance, turned on his heel and quitted the room; and I—I sank on my chair and wept.

"Oh, Lord Alresford, when will these mutual heartburnings cease? When will you give me your heart? Had you rifled my treasured secrets, never could I have ventured more into your presence—to be despised, and made, perhaps, the object of your compassionate regard! Oh, mamma! dear, dear Helen! I have need, indeed, of all the love and consolation you both can offer. Come and aid me to bear a burden which daily grows more intolerable!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

A DUEL AND ITS RESULT.

THE following morning, Mildred arose refreshed and composed. Her dreams had been happy ones: hope once again agitated her heart; and fresh, bright, and radiant, she descended, and greeted her parents with the warmest of affectionate welcomes. There was something so familiar, something that vividly recalled old times, in seeing them and Helen once more gathered round her, which called forth her happiest flow of spirits. Lord Elvaston, as usual, after taking two or three strides from the table to the window and back again, and congratulating his daughter on the improvement in her looks, seized his favourite *Times* newspaper, and was preparing to make himself exceedingly comfortable over its columns, when Mildred playfully snatched it away, vowing that, at least for one morning, she would monopolise his undivided attention.

Lord Elvaston laughed, remonstrated, but finally yielded the point; and Mildred, speaking in her most animated accents, was bearing away the paper in triumph, when Lord Alresford entered the room. She paused, but the good spell was still upon her, and she instantly advanced and greeted him more cordially than was her wont. She thought he looked disturbed, anxious, as the smile with which he met her vanished immediately; and her spirits sank, for in spite of herself a foreboding of evil arose in her mind.

"What is the matter, Alresford, that you look so discomfited this morning?" asked Lord Elvaston, in his blunt manner, shaking hands with the earl.

Lady Elvaston glanced with some uneasiness, first at her daughter, then on Helen. Mildred's eyes were fixed on her husband, and mutely asked the same question as her father.

"Merely a letter from Baynton, who is compelled to delay his visit to us for a few days," replied Lord Alresford, evasively. "Come, Mildred, will you not take your post and give us some breakfast?"

Slowly she walked to her seat. She felt that something more than the mere disappointment of Sir Gerard's visit furrowed her husband's brow; besides, the unhappy are always timid: apprehensive lest some worse evil should befall them."

"Well, and what detains Baynton? Any mishap in his farm? He wrote me, a week or two ago, a most flourishing description of his management," said Lord Elvaston, laughing satirically at the idea of Sir Gerard turning farmer.

"My dear Helen, pray do not pour all the cream away into the water in the tea-cups," whispered Mildred, trying to rally and laughing at Helen's assiduous efforts to lighten her labours.

"No; the truth of the matter is," resumed Lord Alresford, in a low voice, "that Baynton's letter brings me the painful intelligence of a hostile encounter having taken place yesterday morning, between Colonel Sutherland and my young neighbour, Lord Normanton——"

"Eh! what—a duel?" interrupted Lord Elvaston, abruptly. "What the devil was it all about? Surely Baynton has not been fool enough to run his head into the scrape."

"He was Lord Normanton's second. Being an intimate friend he could not refuse that office, after having used the most strenuous exertion to adjust the quarrel. It is a most deplorable affair; and arose, I understand, from some high words which passed between Lord Normanton and Colonel Sutherland, whom the former accidentally encountered at Moreton," said Lord Alresford, hastily glancing at Mildred's pallid lips and face.

Both Lady Elvaston and Helen looked inexpressibly shocked, but they had too much womanly tact to notice poor Mildred's agitation. The unconscious cause of Colonel Sutherland's first infidelity to his betrothed, they guessed what her feelings must be; and though Helen leant forward so as to screen her a moment from observation, it was not by words her sympathy was expressed. Lord Elvaston stood in silent cogitation; his kind, good-humoured face expressing what it seldom did—perplexity.

"You have not yet told us the result of the duel," said he at length.

Lord Alresford hesitated, and looked at Mildred. She struggled for firmness, dreading lest her husband should imagine that her emotion arose from excessive fear for Colonel Sutherland's safety. She knew herself innocent of any design or wish of supplanting Miss Conway; yet the scene at the Nethercote fête weighed heavily on her conscience, and brought to her mind, in bitter humiliation, the salutary precept, "Shun even the very appearance of evil!" She raised her eyes imploringly to her husband's face. He hastened to answer.

"Lord Normanton is badly wounded in the shoulder. I trust not, however, dangerously; though the surgeons seem to be of opinion that his cure will be a tedious one. Colonel

Sutherland, I grieve to say, received his antagonist's ball in his side. It has since been extracted ; yet, from the excessive hemorrhage, serious apprehensions are entertained as to the result of the operation. Baynton, of course, remained for the present with his friend at Witham," replied the earl, quickly turning aside.

"A pretty affair, truly ! Two young men, with headstrong passions, choose to shoot at each other, perhaps rob their country of a valuable life—or rather of two, for the survivor, if a man of feeling, drags on a miserable existence, haunted by bitter remorse, and morally unfit for anything but moping misanthropy,—and all in vindication of the shadow men call—honour ! It sounds inhuman at this moment to utter such a thing, but I will say that dastardly fellow, Sutherland, has got what he richly deserves. It was always my private opinion that he wanted kicking out of the regiment, for his heartless conduct to Miss Conway !" exclaimed Lord Elvaston in a fume, pacing up and down the room.

"I am assured, by Sir Gerard, that the immediate cause of the quarrel was not his dishonourable trifling with Miss Conway. I understand she had absolutely broken off her engagement before her brother's return home ; when, from some deplorable impulse, Colonel Sutherland went to Moreton, and insolently refused to leave the house without an interview with her. Lady Normanton's nervous dread of a scene unhappily induced Miss Conway's compliance, and, in the midst of her conversation with Colonel Sutherland, Lord Normanton arrived, to pay his first visit to his mother and sisters since his return to England. The sequel of this history is easily imagined. Lord Normanton properly insisted upon Colonel Sutherland's immediate departure ; he refused, and a challenge was the result," said Lord Alresford, addressing Mildred, as he drew a chair to her side.

She felt the kind consideration of his words and manner, and her heart thanked him for it. Did he guess her bitter compunction, and interpret rightly the sigh which involuntarily arose, as she looked back on the thorny, sinuous path she had chosen, in preference to the straight, though more abrupt one, which would have led her to the same goal in peace and safety ? She smiled as he took her little hand in his ; for her life for months past was an exemplification of what she had indirectly been the means of teaching poor Maude—of that rare self-possession which great sorrow alone can give—of that ready command of the outward signs of a spirit at ease, which serves oft but as a glittering robe thrown over the wasting wretchedness within.

"The consummate villain ! to come amongst us, conceal his engagement, and all but publicly deny it ! This young Nor-

manton must be a fine, spirited fellow ; and though I heartily abominate affairs of this kind, it will give me infinite pleasure to shake him by the hand some day," exclaimed Lord Elvaston, seating himself again at the breakfast table.

"Do not let us talk more on this painful subject. Our discussion cannot benefit either of the sufferers, and unhappily the topic must be with us at present an ever-recurring one," interposed Lady Elvaston, who marked with painful anxiety the quick nervous tremor which every now and then shook poor Mildred's frame.

Her wish was obeyed—breakfast was speedily brought to a conclusion, and then Mildred flew to the solitude of her sanctuary, to struggle for composure, and, if attainable,—self-reconciliation. She felt stunned by the tragic finale of her brief love-passage with Colonel Sutherland—its baneful shadow still hovered over her, though its reality had long, long fled.

Hasty in her resolves, Lady Alresford determined, though fraught with some humiliation to herself, to go at once to Wardour Court, and make what reparation she could in the way of sympathy to Maude Conway ; who still remained Lady Catherine's guest. Accordingly, accompanied by Helen, she set off after luncheon, while her mother strolled through the grounds with the earl. When they arrived at Wardour, a travelling carriage and four stood before the door, much splashed, and the horses looking jaded and weary, as if having recently performed a rapid journey. Lady Alresford and Helen exchanged quick glances of dismay as they alighted and entered the house. In the hall they met Lady Catherine and Miss Conway. Maude's eyes were red and swelled with excessive weeping, and her face pale and almost rigid with intense grief. She hurriedly exchanged salutations with Lady Alresford, and once more throwing her arms round Lady Catherine's neck, sprang into the carriage, which in another instant whirled away. Lady Catherine's full, ripe lip trembled, and tears rolled plentifully down her cheeks, as she then silently led the way to the drawing-room. Mrs. Otway was there, restlessly pacing up and down, her face the very picture of woe and consternation. From her Mildred learned that Miss Conway had been suddenly sent for to Witham ; for an unfavourable change having occurred during the night in Lord Normanton's state, he importunately demanded she might be summoned. Lady Normanton, on the receipt of the express announcing her son's wound, fell into violent convulsions,—this time no imaginary ailment,—and had been ever since confined to her bed ; while her amiable daughter, Isabella, having made arrangements to pass the ensuing three months in Paris under Mrs. St. Priest's chaperonage, could with diffi-

culty be induced to delay her journey to nurse her mother. An indescribable dread seemed to weigh upon Lady Catherine's spirits, and vainly did Mildred seek for words of comfort and hope; but knowing from dire experience that the first gush of grief is more easily assuaged when none stand by to witness the soul's prostration, she took her leave; having first obtained a renewal of Lady Catherine's promise to spend a portion of the ensuing week at Amesbury, should nothing unforeseen prevent.

The next few days glided heavily along; and though blessed by the presence of her parents and dearest friend, they were perhaps the most exquisitely painful of any Mildred had yet spent. She felt disturbed and humbled by a catastrophe, the issue of which was yet uncertain; besides, when alone with her mother, a feeling of unusual restraint bound her tongue. Upon the subject of the duel, and its preceding circumstances, she found it impossible to discourse: and equally did she recoil from any allusion to her present position in her husband's regard. On this latter topic Lady Elvaston most judiciously forbore to press her: either satisfied with the result of her own observation, or reassured by her long conversation with Lord Alresford. Mildred would almost have felt ashamed to own to herself the feeling of relief with which early in the following week, she hailed Lady Emily Baynton's visit. Her presence rendered conversation more general, and made less perceptible, by encroaching somewhat on the easy intercourse of the family party, that false position which was her daily, hourly bane. Besides this, she had the extreme felicity of seeing that Helen's quiet good sense and talents produced their desired effect upon her guest. Lady Emily was at first attracted; then as Helen gained on her good opinion, her approbation and friendship were not long in manifesting themselves; and, ere Sir Gerard's arrival, she was quite established in his mother's good graces. Not but what there existed a lingering feeling of disappointment in Lady Emily's bosom that her son had not made a more elevated choice; but still she was too good, too truly conscientious, to allow merely ambitious views to thwart his happiness. She came to Amesbury, therefore, in no hostile spirit against the secret hope, which, in spite of her better reason, fluttered at Helen's heart. She knew that her son's wealth and position made him a desirable prize for the machinations of certain match-making young ladies; but she had witnessed the signal defeat of more than one such fair strategist, for Sir Gerard persisted in preferring the task of selecting, rather than the compliment of being selected. Lady Emily, however, came with the intent of judging Helen rigidly — of bringing her utmost tact to her son's rescue: should she perceive that his fastidious notions of woman's

delicacy and reserve were artfully lulled by the fascinations of an *intriguante*, eager only for the distinction it was in his power to bestow, and caring little for his affection except so far as it would promote her object. Helen, on her part, was not slow in responding to the friendly overtures of Lady Emily: whose kind and thoughtful dignity of manner challenged her admiration, and took away the feeling of embarrassment she might reasonably have anticipated in making the acquaintance of Sir Gerard's mother. In his letters to Lady Emily, her son meanwhile expressed the utmost impatience to join the party at Amesbury; which was soon increased by the arrival of Lady Catherine and Mr. Egremont Turville, who required little persuasion to become an inmate of the same mansion with his fair cousin. Lord Normanton's wound was progressing slowly, though favourably,—so much so, that, after the lapse of ten days, he was able to rise from his bed and spend a portion of each day on a couch in the library: and Sir Gerard spoke hopefully of his speedy convalescence.

Mildred performed her part of hostess to perfection. At once graceful, dignified, and *prevenante*, not one of the numerous guests daily surrounding Lord Alresford's hospitable board divined how deep a canker consumed the heart of the fair creature whose winning smiles and exquisite manner, made everybody envy the earl's felicity. Great, indeed, would have been the marvel could they have seen her, after one of these brilliant displays, seated uneasily, languidly, before her toilette: impatiently awaiting the moment when she might escape from Aglaë's scrutiny, and give herself up to the luxury of lonely meditation. Ceasing then to feign, she contemplated her position as it was; sometimes a glimmering of hope would mingle with her bitter musings, and unconsciously impart a glow of animation to her speaking features; at others, in her fits of lowly humiliation, contrasting herself with the bright, radiant, intellectual Lady Catherine, the clouds in her destiny would seem to gather, and circle her in unfathomable gloom; and then fervently did she supplicate for strength and submission to bear unmurmuringly the hard discipline and burden of life. Solaced by the fervour of her prayers, she would then rise and seek her bed, comforted and prepared on the morrow to renew with unabated resolution her routine of duty, with a feeling of half-defined confidence at her heart that her vigorous strivings after right were not always destined to remain unrewarded.

The afternoon before Sir Gerard Baynton's arrival, the post-bag brought a letter to Lady Alresford from Clara Tennyson. After giving a full detail of the pending preparations for her wedding, Miss Tennyson concluded her epistle by proposing to pay a flying visit to Amesbury, to say farewell previous to

this event; as she was staying with her brother at a friend's house in the neighbouring county of W——shire, and would pass through Avington on her road home. Mildred, with an amused, puzzled expression of countenance, put the letter into the earl's hand; and as he only shrugged his shoulders, and made no comment when he gave it back, she sat down and penned an answer in the affirmative. The following day, accordingly, as they were just sitting down to lunch, Sir Richard's carriage drove up to the door, and Miss Tennyson, hanging on her brother's arm, presently sailed into the room.

"Well, my dear Lady Alresford, I am so enchanted to see you again!" exclaimed she, turning again to Mildred, after she had received, and returned the salutations of the party. "All our good folks in M——shire, I can assure you, have not doffed the sackcloth; they still mourn your absence! But how beautiful your new home is! Dick and I have been in raptures during our drive through the park. My dear lord, we must compare you to some envious magician, who carried off the star of our neighbourhood, to shower upon her the magnificence of Aladdin's fairy palace," and Miss Tennyson's eye glanced round the noble apartment in which she stood, and then sought a wider range over the valleys and woodlands of the park.

"Do you think so, Miss Tennyson? I fear, then, Lady Alresford is lamentably insensible of the wonders I have achieved for her: she takes things, I assure you, far more philosophically than Aladdin's heroine—the princess with the unpronounceable name," replied Lord Alresford, smiling, and turning negligently away.

"Does she really?" responded Miss Tennyson, with a little incredulous laugh: but Mildred here hastily interposed, and invited Clara to follow her brother's example, and take some lunch.

"Oh, thank you, no! We partook of a very late breakfast before setting out: but Dick has such an extraordinary appetite," replied Miss Tennyson, glancing at her brother. "It is something quite ludicrous to see him and Frank Norwood devour, in anticipation of a long day's run with the hounds!"

"Mr. Norwood is a hard rider and an indefatigable huntsman, Miss Tennyson, and would find little satisfaction in the sylph-like repasts you patronise," rejoined Sir Gerard.

"Frank Norwood has promised to hunt only every other day during the approaching season. His reckless riding makes me shudder; especially as he has already nearly broken his neck half a dozen times in those odious steeple-chases. I am perfectly determined that he shall never ride in another."

"I admire your spirited resolution, Clara. I should advise

you, however, to put pic-nics also under the same ban. I know you have a weakness for such pastoral treats, and never enjoy them so thoroughly as when rendered more delightful and seasonable by a previous downfall of rain," said Lord Elvaston, with good-humoured pleasantry.

"Oh, that unfortunate Fernly expedition! I believe, Lord Elvaston, you will never forget it; but I appeal to you, Sir Gerard, whether, after all, it was not a very pleasant party?"

"Very much so, indeed, Miss Tennyson. I retain a most vivid remembrance of a certain promenade you and I took round a vast meadow, which, you know we both agreed at the time, reminded us strongly of walking over a wet sponge," replied Sir Gerard, laughing.

"Well, at any rate, my dear Clara, I think it is very ungrateful conduct to laugh at you for an accident you could not avert. You devised a party of pleasure, and it was not your fault if the rain came and frustrated your kind intentions," said Lady Elvaston.

"Thank you, Lady Elvaston, for espousing my defence; for even mamma, whenever she has the cramp in her toe, vows it is a kind of rheumatic affection caught from the damps of Fernly; though everyone present can bear me witness that she sat swaddled up stiffly in cloaks and wrappers, like a babe of the *ancien regime*. By-the-bye, you have heard, I suppose, that poor Colonel Sutherland, who seemed to enjoy our party so much, was reported the day before yesterday to be at his last gasp?"

"Stuff and nonsense! you know, Clara, we heard afterwards that the report was much exaggerated," interposed Sir Richard. "My friend, Danby, rode over to make inquiries at the farmhouse, where Colonel Sutherland has lain ever since the duel; and there he ascertained that no material change had occurred in his situation, which still continued precarious in the extreme."

"Lady Catherine and Miss Campbell must have found a world of business to transact this morning at Wardour Court. They have been gone upwards of four hours," remarked Sir Gerard, hastily, as he observed Miss Tennyson's sharp eyes fixed eagerly upon him; preparatory, as he feared, to putting some searching interrogatory relative to the duel.

"Catherine has her birds and flowers to look after; besides which, Sir Gerard, she would doubtless show Miss Campbell her pictures, and all the pretty things she has collected at Wardour," said Mrs. Otway, deprecatingly.

"Ladies always contrive to eke out a wonderful portion of time in doing nothing. The *dolce far niente* is part of the business of their lives," exclaimed Mr. Turville, in his dry, sarcastic manner; who, since Miss Tennyson's arrival, had

continued to eat his lunch in silence, occasionally raising his eyes with a look of wonderment to her face.

"Who is that dreamy, shy-looking man, who sat next to Lady Elvaston, Mildred?" asked Miss Tennyson, as they quitted the dining-room.

"Mr. Egremont Turville; a cousin of Lady Catherine Neville's, and one of the most popular men in this neighbourhood."

"Indeed! Does he at all resemble his cousin? I am dying with impatience to see this much vaunted Lady Catherine. How do you like her, Mildred?"

"I think report did scarcely justice to her beauty and talents," responded Mildred, decisively.

"She must be a great acquisition to you, then," rejoined Miss Tennyson; and her eyes fixed themselves inquiringly on Lady Alresford's face.

"Yes, very. I hope you will find everything as you like it here, Clara," said Mildred, as she ushered Miss Tennyson to her apartment.

"Thank you, it seems impossible to want anything," replied Miss Tennyson, quickly, glancing round the room. "So Helen Campbell, you say, is gone with Lady Catherine to Wardour Court. Does Sir Gerard Baynton's admiration continue?"

"He pays her a great deal of attention: but Sir Gerard only arrived this morning; so it is impossible to say," replied Mildred, evasively.

"Ah, but men so often are unprincipled enough to amuse themselves in that way without any serious intentions. What does Lady Emily say to the prospect of having Miss Campbell for her daughter?"

"I have never heard her express an opinion on a subject upon which one probably may never be asked by her son."

"Should Sir Gerard make up his mind to offer to Helen Campbell, it will be the fourth match concluded this year; for do you know, Mildred, I have a strange inkling, nay, one amounting almost to certainty, that Dick has taken it into his head to fall in love with that little dawdling milksop, Caroline Vincent; and if so, the marriage will surely take place, for both she and Mrs. Wedderbourne are just the people to jump greedily at a baronetcy."

"Opposites always meet, you know; so perhaps Sir Richard's exuberant spirit and Caroline Vincent's languid sentiment combined, may make a very happy couple. Do not be long before you join us, Clara, for I want to show you my boudoir and garden while a gleam of sun lingers," said Lady Alresford, as she quitted the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SIR GERARD BREAKS THE ICE.

Two days after Miss Tennyson's arrival found the same party assembled at Amesbury ; yet, during this brief period, many and varied were the feelings excited amongst Lord Alresford's guests. To the above-mentioned young lady, however, her visit proved a source of unmingled pleasure ; when she talked, she found courteous and patient listeners, for no one appeared inclined to dispute or contest her assertions, and therefore she flattered herself that her communications and comments were heard with eager interest. In the evenings, her conversation was chiefly divided between Sir Gerard Baynton and Mr. Turville. This latter personage, who loved anything original, in whatever form or shape it came across him, so encouraged Miss Tennyson's loquacity by a kind of mute deference, throwing in here and there a word, that to his infinite amusement, in the fulness of her confidence, she poured into his ear, not only her own history, but passages, also, in the lives of most of her acquaintance and friends. Mr. Turville's grave, dry manner, and pertinent questions, made her feel more at ease than Sir Gerard's lively railery ; yet still there were moments when she could not quite make out her new friend to her satisfaction.

People who habitually manage to drown thought in a whirl of heedless, bustling excitement, seldom require much outward stimulus ; therefore Miss Tennyson contrived to amuse herself to her heart's content, despite the incompatibility of her disposition and habits with those of the personages she was called upon for the moment to associate with. The only portions of the day she found insufferably tedious, were those three or four hours which ladies generally spend alone before luncheon, over their embroidery and Berlin work ; and truly this period is about as dull and dreary a one as can well be imagined. To render such a sacrifice to stitchery tolerable, either one's companions ought to be very dear, intimate friends, or excessively clever intellectual people ; when subjects may be mooted other than droning the morning away, as is too frequently the case, in dissertations on dress, wools, and canvas, or the far less innocent theme of sullyng a neighbour's reputation by petty gossip. Many an unconscious person's character receives its first wounds from tattling scandal falling from pretty lips, acrimonious with *envie*, over a lady's morning work-table. However, let the conversation be charit-

able and entertaining as it might, it was all the same to Miss Tennyson ; who chafed under the cruel necessity of sitting with her needle in her hand, instead of roaming far and wide wherever her restless spirit prompted. She found no amusement in needlework : the same elegant basket containing the self-same piece of soiled canvas, with its one solitary rose, ever apparently destined to bloom alone, had been her invariable accompaniment in every visit paid during the last three years. Her silks and wools were in such dire disorder, that it needed Prince Percinet's magic wand to unravel the tangled mass under the canvas in the basket ; and which, therefore, rendered abortive every renewed attempt at industry the very desperation of her circumstances might prompt. To make her position the more pitiable, her companions were anything but congenial. The Lady Catherine's society Miss Tennyson found an intolerable restraint. She thought her cold, reserved, and haughty ; and not all the charm of her beauty could lessen the awe she felt in her presence. In Clara's giddy levity, Lady Catherine at once detected a mind unrefined and frivolous, and accordingly she shrank from her somewhat hasty overtures, with more real disgust than she perhaps would have experienced, had she properly appreciated the hearty good-nature subsisting under Miss Tennyson's off-hand manner and loud imperious tones. In her own heart also, Miss Tennyson accused Mildred of having lost her vivacity ; and perhaps of putting on a little more of the stateliness of her new rank, than was perfectly warrantable towards an old acquaintance. She was surprised—though her ideas ran in such confusion that she scarcely knew wherefore—at the degree of friendship existing between Lady Alresford and the Lady Catherine.

Mildred, however, in these few days of unrestricted intercourse with her imaginary rival, had learned much that was humiliating to her self-esteem ; yet the trial brought balm to the dire suspicions which so long tortured her. Lady Catherine, in a few eloquent simple words, recounted the foundation, rise, and progress of her friendship with Lord Alresford. She spoke of him enthusiastically, as one upon whose good opinion and esteem she set boundless value. She spoke of him unreservedly, without a shadow of embarrassment in her words or manners. Mildred glanced on her speaking features, on her clear, truthful eye, and inwardly acknowledged—need we say in a spirit both humbled and contrite—that her own groundless jealousy had alone raised the hideous phantom which so long haunted her. As for Lady Catherine, she could not sufficiently marvel at the change she witnessed : the Mildred she now saw was a being so totally different from the reserved, capricious Lady Alresford of the preceding months. She was amazed also at the varied extent of Mildred's acquirements ; and tacitly, with-

out any undue presumption, she recognised a mind capable of coping with her own, in its most lofty aspirations. Lady Alresford's beauty, also, in her eyes now assumed a softer character, and she was never weary of watching the seductive grace of her manner; yet with her quick perception, Lady Catherine instantly detected the strangeness of her demeanour towards the earl: to him alone was her manner reserved and shy, and at times even cold and uncertain. She felt there was a hidden spring of bitterness, incomprehensible to her, in that lot which in her moments of keen anguish she had presumptuously dared to contrast with her own; and once, and only once, she hinted her suspicion to Helen Campbell: but the allusion seemed so painful to the latter, that she never more reverted to the subject.

As may be supposed, the society of Miss Tennyson, overflowing in her way with happiness and prosperity, was not likely to prove over-acceptable to the trio of friends; and the certainty that she was to depart on the following day would have acted upon them as a very enlivening circumstance, had it not also brought the painful recollection that all the party was likewise to disperse. Lord and Lady Elvaston, anxious to take advantage of the mild autumnal weather, had also fixed their departure on the morrow for a month's sojourn at Brighton, before settling for the winter with their daughter at Amesbury. Mildred, therefore, was not even in her usual spirits, and sad and silent she pursued her occupation. The day had turned out slightly rainy, and as frequent showers rendered it impossible to wander far from the house, the ladies in the afternoon again assembled in the drawing-room. Lady Catherine took up a book, and threw herself on a couch; Helen kept up a desultory conversation with Miss Tennyson, while Mildred sat down to answer some notes.

These despatched, she then silently took up her work; and insensibly her thoughts reverted to the morrow, when Lord Alresford, Helen, and herself would remain the sole inmates of the house. On what terms would the earl again meet her after their long suspended private intercourse? and how was her husband affected towards Helen Campbell? Mildred could not satisfactorily answer this latter question. Lord Alresford's manner to her friend was always courteous; but at times there was a distant coldness in his mode of addressing Helen, perfectly incomprehensible. Often, too, he appeared to weigh her words with sharp scrutiny; and she remarked more than once, when walking alone with Helen, that if they chanced to meet the earl, he would strike into an opposite path to avoid the rencontre. What did this conduct portend? so different to Lord Alresford's cordial, friendly reception of those he esteemed. The painful solution forced itself on Mildred's mind that Helen

was only tolerated by the earl ; not yet valued for her own intrinsic merit. In vain she sought the cause of this apparent dislike ; two reasons only suggested themselves : either that the earl's displeasure at female friendship was unconquerable, or that he disapproved of Helen's presuming to aspire to the hand of Sir Gerard Baynton.

The sound of the sharp clapping of the door caused Lady Alresford presently to break off from her reverie, and look up ; when she beheld Miss Tennyson standing before her, armed *cap-à-pie* with cloaks and umbrella, ready equipped to brave the inclemency of the weather for a walk in the park. As soon as Clara vanished, Lady Catherine and Helen threw aside their books and gathered round Lady Alresford. The rain still continued to fall at intervals ; but so softly that it more resembled a heavy, drizzling mist. All the gentlemen were still absent : Sir Gerard had carried off Lord Elvaston to his farm, the others were gone out to shoot. Lady Elvaston, Mrs. Otway, and Lady Emily Baynton were likewise occupied in their own apartments, so that the triad of friends, much to their satisfaction, were left for a considerable time to their own devices.

In about two hours Miss Tennyson returned, having enjoyed, as she declared, a most delicious walk. After fidgeting about the room for some half hour, descanting upon Mr. Frank Norwood's happy qualifications, she suddenly exclaimed,—

“Oh, Mildred, as it is only just four o'clock, pray put down your work and perform your promise of taking me into every nook and corner of this palace of yours. Mamma and Mrs. Wedderbourne would lift up their eyes in astonishment, did I conclude my visit without surveying its wonders. Indeed, I should get quite renowned as a woman devoid of a spark of curiosity ; and as notoriety is always disagreeable, you must really consent, Mildred, and introduce me immediately to your bower ; which, you know, I did not see on the day of my arrival.”

Lady Alresford, always kind and ready to oblige, arose, laid aside her work, and followed Miss Tennyson out of the room. Little, however, did she anticipate the amount of exercise before her, or the extent of Clara's indefatigable curiosity. Not content with walking through the picture-gallery and principal apartments, every closed door in her progress excited her irresistibly to explore its bearings ; every staircase, however narrow, inspired her with the most violent impulse to mount : even Mildred herself had never before penetrated so far into her new home. At length, to Lady Alresford's unfeigned satisfaction, with the exception of the wing in which her own apartments were situated, the mansion was explored from the

housekeeper's room to its uppermost chambers. Gladly, therefore, she bent her steps towards her boudoir.

"Where does that door lead to, Mildred?" asked Miss Tennyson, suddenly pausing, and pointing to a doorway almost concealed under a projecting arch, at no great distance from the boudoir.

"To Lord Alresford's private rooms," replied Mildred, continuing her progress.

Miss Tennyson, however, stood still, and fixed her eye resolutely on the shining mahogany door.

"I should so like to see Lord Alresford's private room: dear Mildred, surely you can gratify my curiosity and take me in. I often penetrate into Dick's sanctum; but as for that, so all the world might at any time, and only be rewarded for their pains by the edifying spectacle of two or three old racing calendars on the table, mixed up with a queer jumble of fishing-tackle, powder-flasks, caricatures, unanswered letters, a *Bell's Life* stuffed in an arm-chair near the fire, and a pair of old boots roasting within the fender. The earl is from home, therefore, I am sure, I have your consent, Mildred;" and before Lady Alresford could interpose, to her unspeakable consternation, Miss Tennyson flung the door wide open.

"My dear Clara, I must entreat, nay, I request you most peremptorily, not to enter this room. Lord Alresford would be excessively displeased, and most justly so, at our intrusion here during his absence," said Mildred, as she saw Clara unceremoniously usurp a privilege that she had not yet once availed herself of.

"Displeased! You cannot be serious, Mildred," responded Miss Tennyson, retreating a few steps towards Lady Alresford, who stood on the threshold of the door; then, immediately bounding forwards again into the room, she exclaimed—"what a splendid prospect his lordship has! It quite takes away one's breath with admiration——"

"Clara, come away, I beseech," interrupted Mildred, earnestly; though her own eye wandered with eager interest over the *terra incognita* before her.

The room was a moderately-sized one, with a deep bay window commanding an extensive view. A Turkey carpet covered the floor, and curtains of heavy crimson and blue tapestry somewhat softened the glare of light pouring in from the window. On one side of the room folding doors, slightly ajar, opened, as Mildred concluded, into the earl's dressing-room, and a few choice paintings hung on the opposite wall. An oblong library table stood in front of a blazing fire, upon which lay several books, an open blotting-case, and various writing materials. The chairs, escritoire, and book-shelves were of dark polished oak; though nothing could be more

simple and unpretending than the furniture and arrangement of the room.

"Upon my word, Mildred, I never saw a more exact likeness of yourself than this ; pray grant me a few brief moments to admire and gaze upon you," exclaimed Miss Tennyson, laughingly pointing to a portrait hanging over the fire-place. "Really, what a gallant man your liege lord must be ! I protest here is another miniature of your fair self. I wonder, when I have been married five months, whether Frank Norwood will think my picture worth enshrining so carefully."

Mildred's curiosity was now fairly aroused. She was not aware that the earl possessed her portrait ; and soon, with a beautiful, changeful colour, flitting and deepening on her cheek, she stood by the side of her pertinacious guest. The framed portrait she then at once recognised as having been the property of Lady Alresford ; who had doubtless presented it to the earl. The picture underneath was a small medallion portrait of herself, set round with pearls, painted about two years after her betrothal to Lord Alresford. It was many years since she last gazed upon it, but yet tears sprang to her eyes as she vividly recalled the little scene its presentation to him gave rise : her childish bashfulness and reluctance to venture on so momentous an undertaking, until at length, encouraged by her mother, she timidly tendered it. She recollected then, how her young heart thrilled with joy and pride at the manner in which her offering was received—at the assurance which then fell from the earl's lips, that nothing should ever induce him to part with this, the first token of her love. She saw he had remembered his pledge ; and her own faithlessness in the affair of the ring (which a few days after receiving the portrait, he placed upon her finger) smote with fresh compunction on her conscience. Then, for some few minutes, she stood sad and absorbed : her emotion, luckily unobserved by Miss Tennyson ; who, now that she had lured Lady Alresford into the apartment, felt any scruples about the propriety of her intrusion vanish, and was amusing herself by calmly passing the pictures in review. At length her eye rested on the folding doors, and, in another instant, she darted through them into the earl's dressing-room. The noise caused Lady Alresford to turn round. She felt excessively provoked ; yet, at the same time, amused at Miss Tennyson's reckless audacity. As Mildred was well aware expostulation would be lost on the pertinacious Clara, she merely reminded her of the lateness of the hour, and, treating her like a wayward child, tried to lure her away, by promising to show her something better worth looking at in her own apartment. Clara, however, turned a deaf ear to her bribe ; and Mildred could have wept with shame and vexation at the unpleasant position her guest's

levity had betrayed her into. Miss Tennyson approached the dressing-table.

"I perceive," exclaimed she loudly, "the earl, with all his handsome looks, is not half such a fop as that brother of mine. Mercy upon me! you should only see Dick's toilette, with his pomades, essences, and pomatum for his hair, which I sometimes tell him he anoints to such good purpose as to convey to my mind a tolerably good notion of what a Nubian savage is like! I suppose that door opposite communicates with your apartments, Mildred?"

Lady Alresford raised her eyes to the window; one glance at the scenery without showed her that it did.

"Now, dear Mildred, if you are not tired, we will go to the boudoir. His lordship will never divine the domiciliary visit we have paid to his apartments," exclaimed Miss Tennyson, after vainly awaiting Lady Alresford's answer.

Mildred, only too delighted to carry her off, as she was in momentary fear of the earl's return, immediately professed her willingness to adjourn to the boudoir; inwardly resolving that nothing should ever tempt her to play the part of cicerone to Miss Tennyson again; when, to her dismay, she heard Lord Alresford's step in the corridor. She knew that there was now no chance of escaping undetected from the apartment. What would the earl think of her prying intrusion during his absence? for in Miss Tennyson's presence it was impossible to explain how the circumstance happened. For a minute the strongest possible impulse possessed her to flee; or, at any rate, to make the attempt. As for Clara, she laughed and tittered, evidently thinking their sudden discomfiture an amazing good joke. Lord Alresford paused at the door, and gazed in perfect astonishment when he beheld the occupants of his room. He looked first at his wife's flushed cheek, then in the face of her companion.

Mildred stood silently, without attempting an explanation; and for once Clara's undaunted spirit came to her rescue.

"I dare say your lordship feels rather surprised at seeing me here," exclaimed she, without the slightest hesitation, for by the smile of amusement which immediately sprang to the earl's lip, she saw that his threatened displeasure at their intrusion was dissipated; "but having been all over the house with Lady Alresford, she could not resist my entreaty to be admitted to a glimpse of these exquisite pictures. You know, Lord Alresford, I pique myself on my powers of persuasion, therefore, I trust you will pardon my curiosity."

"Certainly; and, moreover, I must be allowed also to express my gratitude for the flattering surprise of finding my room honoured by Miss Tennyson's presence!"

Clara cast a triumphant glance at Lady Alresford, and then hastily exclaimed,—

"Mr. Norwood has some fine pictures at Chartleigh, but they are not to be compared to these; every one of which appears a *chef d'œuvre* of its kind. I cannot regret my intrusion, as it has procured me a sight of them," added she, observing that Mildred evidently did not intend to come forward to her aid.

"There are some equally good pictures by the same artists in the gallery," replied Lord Alresford coldly. "How did you discover these half-dozen paintings, Miss Tennyson?"

Clara coloured, and bit her lip.

"I was attracted by that admirable likeness of Lady Alresford," replied she evasively, after a short pause.

"Well, Miss Tennyson, I am glad you approve of my pictures, as there is really nothing else here to repay the trouble you have taken. But I am at your command, should you desire to inspect any other object in this apartment," added the earl, with a smile.

"Oh no, I thank you. Mildred has been most kind and indulgent, and has exhibited everything she thought likely to give me the slightest gratification," rejoined Clara hastily, for once feeling herself out of place.

Lord Alresford smiled.

"I am sorry Lady Alresford has forestalled me in this pleasant task, Miss Tennyson; but I dare say she has done the honours better than I should, having so very familiar an acquaintance with everything the room contains likely to interest you," said the earl, glancing archly at Mildred.

Miss Tennyson hastily drew out her watch.

"Five o'clock," exclaimed she, making a hurried retreat towards the door. "Mildred, do you know I am beginning to despair of ever catching a glimpse at your boudoir. I must say good-bye now, or my maid will be in convulsions at the sight of my straight curls, should I dare present myself to benefit by the mysteries of her craft a moment later. I suppose the rain spoiled your sport this afternoon, Lord Alresford?" said she, opening the door.

"I have not quitted the house since last I had the pleasure of seeing you. Sir Gerard and Lord Elvaston are not yet returned from the Chauntry," replied the earl, laughing.

Miss Tennyson uttered some expression of astonishment, descanted in a few words on the mildness of the weather, and then closed the door and disappeared.

Mildred would have given much to follow her, but she felt that her hasty retreat would probably be displeasing to the earl as well as appear strange in the eyes of the giddy Clara.

She stood, therefore, silently by the fire, leaning against the

mantelpiece, with a very grave face ; feeling at times half inclined to laugh, half inclined to weep.

"I see by that puzzled look of yours, Mildred, that you are striving to account to me for your presence in this room. I have divined the reason already : the fact is, you did not bring Miss Tennyson here, but she brought you,—is it not so ? " said Lord Alresford, presently, in a tone of great amusement.

"Yes, I believe that is a true statement of the case," replied Mildred, smiling.

"But you came only on the supposition that I was from home."

"I feel greatly distressed at our intrusion, Lord Alresford. I vainly besought Clara to refrain from entering this room, but she persisted in disregarding my entreaties. I trust you are not displeased ? " said Mildred, looking anxiously on the earl's rather clouded brow.

"Oh, certainly not. It was, nevertheless, a great piece of impertinence on Miss Tennyson's part," replied Lord Alresford, pointedly, entering his dressing-room.

Mildred wondered whether she was to take this as a sign of dismissal. She, however, still lingered ; for the earl's tones were cold, and she had now the most intense horror of anything approaching a misunderstanding. Presently, he returned. She still stood by the fire.

For some minutes neither spoke.

"Why are you so silent, Lord Alresford ? Perhaps you find me in your way, and I had better leave you," said Mildred, at length, tears of wounded pride springing to her eyes at the indifference the earl manifested on their first private interview for so long a period.

"Stay, Mildred ; you know that these suppositions of yours are perfectly unreasonable. I am vexed—annoyed beyond measure—that you should think it necessary to apologise for your presence here ; that you should be so absurd, so heartless, as actually to talk to me of intrusion. Mildred, can you find no other way to mark your indifference save by this almost insulting reserve ? "

Never before had she seen him so angry for so slight a cause.

"Indeed, Lord Alresford, your accusation of heartlessness is unmerited. I was wrong to allow this foolish feeling of embarrassment to ——"

"Embarrassment ! What cause have you for embarrassment, and with me, Mildred ? " asked the earl, peremptorily, bending a searching glance on her face.

"I feel so powerless to requite your goodness and indulgence."

"Rather say, conscience reproaches you for your wavering,

undecided course, Mildred. You hide from me feelings which it is your bounden duty to reveal. You cannot bear my scrutiny, therefore you shun me ; or else, wherefore is it that we have only met in public during the past fortnight ? ”

“ Surely, I am not to blame for this, my lord,” murmured Mildred.

“ Did you ever express the slightest desire to see me, Mildred ? Even now, I owe your presence to an accident, which you consider it necessary to deplore. Two motives can alone prompt your total evasion of the terms of concord and amity on which, immediately after our marriage, we agreed to live. Either you *do* care for me, and are therefore keeping up a culpable reserve, or you regard me with absolute, frigid indifference.”

Mildred buried her face in her hands. She trembled, for the words sounded strangely from the earl’s lips. Eagerly did she listen and hope for that one little sentence, that avowal of affection on his part, which would have unlocked the fountain of her heart ; but it came not. Silently Lord Alresford stood, the cloud still resting on his brow. She had never before seen him so hard to be conciliated ; even her tearful eye and pale cheek seemed to have lost their accustomed power. She could not bear to leave him in anger, yet she saw he was resolved to make no overture at reconciliation.

She approached, therefore, and putting her hand in his, timidly raised her eyes with a supplicating expression to his face.

“ If you will forgive my waywardness this once, I will promise never more to offend. Believe me, I am very, very grateful ! ” said she, in faltering accents.

“ Oh, Mildred ! how many more times will you promise this ? Now that you have satisfied your conscience, and made some concession, I suppose you are going ? ” said Lord Alresford, in a tone of sorrowful reproach, still holding her hand.

“ No : I will go or stay, as you desire.”

“ Then stay. Do you remember the day when you gave me this medallion, Mildred ? ” said Lord Alresford, after an interval of silence.

“ Perfectly,” replied she, taking it from his hand. “ This tiny portrait strongly reminds me of my past delinquencies—” she hesitated and coloured. “ Lord Alresford, will you never restore the ring that you gave me in exchange for it ? ” asked she, with emotion.

“ Why should I give back that which you care not for, Mildred ? You rejected and esteemed it of so little value——”

“ Nay ; if I thought so, should I now ask for it again ? ” exclaimed she, imploringly.

“ Some day, perhaps.”

"I see you are resolved not to listen to me, Lord Alresford," said she, resentfully.

"Answer me, Mildred : if you prize not this," and the earl pointed to the wedding-ring on her finger, "of what value can the other—once intended as its mere symbol—be to you ?"

She coloured deeply.

"Give it to me again, if only as a sign, a pledge that you have forgotten and forgiven the past," at length rejoined she, earnestly, hastily turning away.

"Willingly : on these terms I cannot hesitate," said Lord Alresford, passing into the adjoining room, and opening his dressing-case. "Come hither, Mildred ; come and take the ring yourself from the place in which it has lain ever since I rescued it from the hands of Colonel Sutherland. Are you still afraid of intruding ?" added he, sarcastically, as he perceived that she did not immediately obey his summons.

In a minute she stood beside him ; and soon the ring sparkled on her finger. A weight seemed removed from her heart ; for even the very bitterness of his reproach soothed. He stood by her while she talked for the next half-hour with an ease she would have before declared impossible, as she laughingly turned over the contents of his dressing-case, every now and then raising her eyes to his, beaming with the radiance of hope. He did not, could not join in the feelings which prompted her lightheartedness ; and perhaps even she, in a little longer, would have found it impossible to dissemble, and the dressing-case might have been pushed aside for a more thrilling theme, had not the earl's valet entered to apprise his master that it was time to commence his toilette operations to meet his guests at dinner. Mildred hastily arose, for she too had forgotten the hour, and quitted the room, as the hands of the clock pointed to half-past six.

When Lady Alresford entered the drawing-room, half an hour afterwards, the earl was there alone ; as Sir Gerard's pertinacity in exhibiting his agricultural progress had, for once, foiled her father's habitual punctuality. She thought he still looked very grave ; nor did he respond to her trifling query, as she advanced and stood by his side, with his accustomed promptness. Mildred felt a kind of intuitive instinct, that a crisis in her fate was at hand. Had she trifled with her husband to the extent of his forbearance ? She knew the determination of the earl's character, and what if he should now decide to leave her to her own vacillation and too tardy repentance ? for, from her mother's lips she had learned that a high diplomatic mission abroad had been again recently tendered for his acceptance. One by one, however, her guests now entered into the room, and the review of the apprehensions which assailed her must be postponed for future meditation.

The evening passed drearily away. Mildred was in no mood to exert herself; and the prospect of their approaching departure appeared to check the vivacity of the party. Miss Tennyson, her brother, and Mr. Turville, chiefly sustained the conversation at dinner; for the circle was not swelled on this last day by any stranger guests.

Meanwhile, Sir Gerard and Helen, as may be supposed, were not in the merriest of moods at the thought of their speedy separation. His attentions were now so open and marked, that with all her retiring modesty, Helen could not deny to herself the happy consciousness that she was beloved; and the frank, though timid pleasure with which she received Sir Gerard's devotion, rendered her unspeakably dear to him.

With that undefined sensation at heart, which made her feel restless and unhappy without exactly knowing wherefore, Helen retreated from the fling of Miss Tennyson's lively pleasantries, and took a distant seat near the window which opened into the conservatory. Here she was joined by Lady Catherine, and on Sir Gerard's appearance in the drawing-room, he likewise drew a chair near them. Mildred having exhausted every available subject of conversation with Miss Tennyson, and being resolved that she should not next victimise Helen, opened the piano, and there kept her engaged for some time; aided by good Mrs. Otway, who, a little awe-struck and amazed at Clara's showy attempts at *bravura*, sat by her in mute attention.

"You know we return to the Chantry to-morrow, Miss Campbell," said Sir Gerard abruptly, when Lady Catherine, on a signal from Mildred, arose and joined her at the piano.

"Yes, I am very, very sorry." She paused, thinking perhaps that she had said too much, and then added with a slight blush, "You know, Sir Gerard, everyone must regret the loss of Lady Emily's society."

"You admire and love my mother, then, Miss Campbell?"

"Not to feel for Lady Emily the most lively affection and admiration after all her kindness, would indeed be ungrateful," replied Helen, warmly.

"Then, will you not consent speedily to visit her at the Chantry? How happy would my mother be always to have such a companion! Do you not feel the heat of the room intolerable, Miss Campbell? Let us stroll round the conservatory," added Sir Gerard, after a pause.

She silently arose.

"Helen, you will become our guest? Perhaps in the midst of the dear, old familiar scenes, I may take courage, and learn from the lips of my former friend and playfellow, whether the Chantry is ever to be to me what my brightest visions of hap-

piness have dared to picture. Helen, you will come?" and Sir Gerard took and retained her hand in his.

The beautiful colour glowed on Helen's cheek. Every pulse fluttered. She felt that she was beloved, and a bright smile parted her lips. The shadowy obscurity around veiled her features, and fearful for the moment of trusting her voice, she walked on in silence. Sir Gerard impatiently reiterated his question.

"If Lady Emily invites me," at length replied she in a soft low voice, hesitatingly.

"Then you will come, Helen, when my mother bids, and stay until I give you leave to depart," replied Sir Gerard, with a smile.

"Not if you turn out a very strict gaoler," responded she with a light laugh, immediately taking up his tone. "How exquisite yonder group of the daturas look in this glancing light! do they not, Sir Gerard? The flowers at this distance appear like bells of sculptured ivory."

"Yes. Lady Alresford has displayed great taste in the arrangement of her flowers. She possesses, indeed, the most exquisite tact for making everything around her beautiful and happy; and yet, Helen—I fear, though, I am going to make a very impertinent speech—I desire you not to take your ideas of matrimonial felicity from your friend. Most men would be far more *exigeant* and jealous of their wife's smiles, than Alresford seems to be."

"Upon my word, Sir Gerard, it must indeed be a strange, *exigeant* disposition that finds fault with a being like Mildred," replied Helen, bending with heightened colour over a beautiful rose half blown, while her fingers lightly strayed amidst its foliage.

"I am very much mistaken, if Lord Alresford does not find fault, however. You remember their variable courtship, Miss Campbell, and that sad affair with Colonel Sutherland. What now must be Lady Alresford's feelings? though, to a certain degree, the innocent cause of the late disaster."

"Hush, I implore you, Sir Gerard," hastily exclaimed Helen in alarm, as she heard a hasty step down one of the side walks of the conservatory; and soon after Miss Tennyson made her appearance, wearied and heated by her exertions at the piano, and eagerly seeking refreshment, as she said, in the cool temperature around.

Sir Gerard looked inexpressibly provoked, and after a few minutes led Helen back into the drawing-room; but, unfortunately, no fresh opportunity occurred to renew their *tête-à-tête*: as after a little more music, the ladies, remembering the long journey on the morrow before some of the party, made

an early retreat ; despite Miss Tennyson's vociferous assurances, that, so far as her personal comfort went, it was immaterial to her whether she spent the following day bowling along the high roads, or enjoying the luxury of domestic quiet at home.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE HERMITAGE AT MIDNIGHT.

It was little past ten o'clock when Miss Campbell, accompanied by Lady Catherine, entered her room. The latter had greatly attached herself to Helen. She admired the simple, though strong decision of her character ; and perhaps its very contrast with Lady Catherine's own ardent, imaginative temperament, enhanced the attraction. A cheerful fire blazed in the grate, and the two, drawing their chairs close round the hearth, extinguished their candles, and settled themselves comfortably for one of those important nocturnal confabulations in which young ladies delight. The fire light diffused a cheerful ruddy glow over the apartment ; and all things around wore that air of solid comfort which can alone be enjoyed in the well-built, well-furnished rooms of old England.

Helen listened with deep interest to Lady Catherine's animated descriptions of character, and frequent praise of Lord Alresford. From the first, she had rejected the notion that any other tie, save one of warm friendship, founded on mutual esteem and admiration, united Lady Catherine to the earl ; and this conviction was now strengthened and confirmed by the result of her own observation. Helen, besides, felt an inward assurance, from words accidentally dropped from time to time by Lady Catherine, that the cloud which often shadowed her new friend's brow, arose from some hopeless secret attachment she had formed abroad. Lady Catherine, in all their frequent conferences together, studiously turned the conversation from herself ; never admitting the possibility that her heart could bestow itself on anyone, and seldom alluding to her residence abroad.

Helen and her friend had been talking together for about half an hour—Mildred, her husband, and Sir Gerard Baynton, being the prominent subjects of discussion, when, after a smart rap at the door, Lady Catherine's maid entered with a letter, or small packet, in her hand. Wilmot, though a very old and faithfully attached servant, was never remarkable for

amenity of manner or sweetness of visage, and now her features were pinched up into very unequivocal indications of discontent.

"This letter, or whatever it may be, my lady, was left for you about an hour and a half ago, by a person who requested to speak with me, and gave very particular injunctions that it should be delivered without delay. I told the man, flatly, that I could not undertake to give the letter to your ladyship before you retired for the night; but here it is, my lady: a soiled, dirty thing, scarcely fit to present to your ladyship."

"Very well, Wilmot; you did quite right to receive it," replied Lady Catherine carelessly, taking a little square packet from her maid.

"If I might offer a suggestion, Lady Catherine, I should caution you against rashly opening that envelope. There seems a box, or something hard, inside. In Italy, one has heard of strange presents having been sent to ladies. Will not your ladyship allow me first to examine it?" exclaimed Wilmot hastily, seizing her mistress's arm.

"No. I dare say its contents are perfectly harmless, Wilmot. Should I require assistance, you see Miss Campbell is at hand, so I need not detain you here any longer," replied Lady Catherine with visible effort, suddenly putting down the packet on her knee.

Wilmot murmured something to herself; and then, with evident reluctance, obeyed her mistress, and quitted the room. As soon as the door closed Lady Catherine turned, and cast a long, searching glance on her companion. Helen, with an intuitive feeling of delicacy, immediately arose and occupied herself at the table close at hand. She heard the slight crash of the paper as the envelope of the letter yielded to Lady Catherine's impetuous touch, and immediately afterwards a low exclamation, either of pain or astonishment, made her hastily turn again towards her friend. By the light of the fire she then saw something glittering glide from the envelope over Lady Catherine's white gown to the floor. Helen sprang forwards to restore it; but Lady Catherine, with a face pale as ashes, hastily forestalled her, and hid the object, whatever it might be, in her bosom.

"Dear Lady Catherine, I fear you are ill," said Helen, quickly.

"Do not be frightened, Helen; I shall be better directly," replied Lady Catherine, rapidly, as she saw Miss Campbell's eye glance towards the bell.

Astonished beyond measure, Helen sat down again. Lady Catherine buried her face in her hands, while a painful tremor shook her frame. The packet, as our readers have probably conjectured, was from Mr. Randolph, and enclosed the half of

the clasp, on the reception of which Lady Catherine had promised to meet her lover at any hour or place he chose to indicate. The following few words were traced on the paper in which the jewel was wrapped :—

“Half-past eleven to-night, in the Hermitage at the end of the cedar walk.—F. R.”

It was no slight proof of Lady Catherine's love and faith, and of his empire over her, that Mr. Randolph asked. A guest at Amesbury, was it possible that she could comply with his request without danger of compromising her reputation? This it was, the humiliating feeling of carrying on a clandestine intrigue, that brought the flush to her cheek, and which turned her joy into shame and distress. She sat cowering under this sense of humiliation, and shrinking from the pitying gaze of Helen's eyes; yet the intense desire to behold him she loved again, burned strongly within. To fail Mr. Randolph now, would be to retard the consummation of her dearest hope—the avowal of her marriage; for had he not promised—pledged himself—at their next interview to explain the mystery, this secret of his origin, which bound her, as it were, with iron fetters? A smile, bright and trustful, beamed over her expressive features; then she arose, and, after standing a minute in gloomy meditation over the fire, advanced to the windows, and drawing back the curtain gazed without. She then walked to the toilette table, and taking up Helen's watch looked at the hour. The hands pointed to eleven.

“Helen, our knowledge of each other has been brief; we have been thrown together a great deal latterly, and events have ripened our intimacy during this short period, probably more than years of casual intercourse would have done. As a climax to our singular friendship, you must now believe and think just the very opposite to what you are about to hear and witness. I cannot explain; yet I tell you, Helen, that even though contrary to your senses, you must believe me pure and incapable of a dishonouring action as yourself. But to the point: I am under an imperative obligation to meet a person this night. Can you, Helen, direct me to some private mode of egress to the gardens?” asked Lady Catherine, in a low, resolute voice, returning to the fire.

She shrank beneath the gaze of bewildered, utter incredulity, which she read in Helen's eyes.

“Catherine, are you serious? Surely — surely not. It cannot be!” exclaimed Helen, rising, and gently taking Lady Catherine's trembling hand which rested on the mantelpiece.

“Cannot you believe it, Helen, when I—I tell it you? Do you imagine that I would undergo this humiliation for nought? or encounter your withering astonishment for the sake of a

sorry jest?" replied Lady Catherine, passionately, snatching away her hand.

There was a kind of resolute tenacity in Lady Catherine's tone and manner, which convinced Helen that expostulation would be vain; even had their degree of intimacy warranted such interference on her part. Already she stood before the toilette, unclasping her bracelets from her arms and the ornaments from her neck, while the crimson on her cheek glowed with the brightness of the most hectic flush.

"Well, Helen, will you aid me, or must I have recourse to my faithful Wilmot?" at length asked Lady Catherine, turning, so as to confront Helen.

"If nothing will induce you to swerve from your resolution, Lady Catherine, I think I can show you a private way into the garden. In the room adjoining this, there is a window opening on a small glazed balcony for flowers; and from this balcony, a narrow flight of steps descends on to the lawn at the back of the mansion," replied Helen, with visible reluctance.

Lady Catherine impetuously entered the small adjoining apartment, which Mildred had arranged as a kind of study for her friend. Aware of Helen's passionate love for flowers, Lady Alresford had expressly chosen these two rooms for her, and amused herself with collecting within the smaller one everything that fancy suggested was likely to gratify her friend's taste, or afford occupation to her hours of retirement. A few of her best and most successful pictures adorned the walls; and all Helen's favourite authors were arranged in the bookshelves, or displayed on the pretty tables around. The shutters of the balcony window, which were fast closed, afforded a momentary impediment to Lady Catherine's eager investigation. She, however, coolly placed the candle in Helen's hand, and after a brief survey succeeded in flinging open the glass door at the head of the steps. The chill October night wind made Helen retreat; arrayed as she was in her muslin evening dress. It was clear moonlight, and the sky appeared dappled with little silver clouds.

"Surely, dear Catherine, you will not venture abroad without some thicker covering than that thin shawl on your shoulders. If I could but persuade you to postpone this interview till some more propitious night! for instance, until your return to Wardour, when you know there would be no occasion for a nocturnal ramble. Those clouds betoken rain, and at no distant period also. Dear Catherine, do let me prevail," said Helen, earnestly.

Lady Catherine, however, stood immovable, gazing without.

"No, Helen! 'tis a waste of words to seek to dissuade or detain me," at length, replied she, slowly re-entering the room

"But if you will do me a kindness, lend me those," added she, pointing to Helen's bonnet and garden cloak, which lay on a chair near.

"Willingly : let me help you. Stay, Catherine, I will fasten the cloak more securely with the large clasp that Lord Alresford gave me last week," said Helen, hastily going to the toilette-table, and returning with the brooch.

"Ring, and dismiss Wilmot : she will imagine I am occupied with you in this room. Expect me back in half an hour, dear Helen," said Lady Catherine ; and, carefully closing the door, she descended the steps, which on one side were flanked by the mansion wall, and lightly sprang on the lawn.

The hermitage, the place of rendezvous indicated by Mr. Randolph, was about ten minutes walk from the house, situated in one of the most beautiful and romantic spots in the grounds. The planting of this locality had been one of the favourite schemes of the late Lord Alresford ; and its singularity of aspect, and a certain wild, majestic gloom, imposed greatly at first sight. From the flower garden, a circuitous path ingeniously cut, led through a secluded part of the grounds, until at length it lost itself amidst the intricacies of several acres of cedars and fir trees planted in compact square masses, intersected by broad walks of green sward. At the end of the principal alley called, *par excellence*, the Cedar Walk, a sharp turn led to the hermitage ; built on an ornamental bridge over a large piece of water running parallel with the above-mentioned walk.

With light step Lady Catherine pursued her way towards this bourne ; looking, as the wind blew aside her cloak, and revealed the snowy robe beneath, like a spirit flitting amid these gloomy solitudes on its midnight rambles. The moonbeams shed their tranquil, steady glare, chequering the ground around with the tremulous shadows of the waving branches above, and throwing up long, mysterious vistas of gloom at every break in the trees. The rain had fallen plentifully during the day, and sparkling drops still hung here and there on the leaves and grass, and refreshing odours sprang from the moist earth teeming with life and vegetation. Ofttimes the fresh night breeze blew back her bonnet, and compelled her, with a shudder, to wrap the cloak more tightly around her figure ; and more than once she fancied a light drop of rain fell. Above, large watery-looking clouds now rolled in heavy flakes before one another, until, breaking into fantastic forms, they gradually merged into the dense gray masses frowning on the horizon.

Strong as was her courageous resolution, Lady Catherine glanced timidly around as she entered the gloomy cedar grove ; and involuntarily she quickened her pace. Every now and

then a sudden rustle and plunge amongst the long grass and bushes make her start nervously, and precipitately she hurried on, until she turned the angle of the walk, and, to her infinite joy, beheld the hermitage. Yet, excited as were her feelings, a sentiment of awe crept over her, as she gazed on the solemn grandeur of the scene now before her. Deep shadows floated on the broad expanse of the water, contrasting with the tremulous glitter of the moon's rays, here and there fitfully gleaming on its surface. Terrace after terrace of huge, sombre trees sloped down on either side to the water's edge, and beyond, heavy woods, dark and shadowy in the moonlight, bounded the horizon.

With rapid step and beating heart Lady Catherine traversed the bridge, wondering that no loved voice as yet greeted her. The door of the hermitage was wide open. In another moment she sprang into the rustic chamber: but Mr. Randolph was not there. For a brief interval she stood in suspense; disappointment and anxiety oppressing her heart. She threw back her bonnet, and gazed around. The cold, subdued light streamed through the diamond-shaped panes of glass in the windows; but no token or evidence could Lady Catherine perceive of Mr. Randolph having been true to his appointment. The few articles of furniture, also, remained still undisturbed in their places. She knew not what to suppose. At length, reflecting that some unexpected accident might have retarded his arrival, and determined not lightly to abandon her chance of seeing him, she drew a chair forwards; then resting her arms on the table, and burying her face in her hands, thoughts swift and agitating passed through her brain. She heeded not the solitariness of the place, for no terrors, real or imaginary, had power to divert her mind: with folded arms, and her fair young head bowed on the table, she waited.

All at once a gust of wind shook the hermitage, and swept from her side Helen's bonnet, which had fallen from her hand to the floor; presently large, round drops of rain fell with a heavy, sudden plash on the stone steps. Lady Catherine hurriedly arose from her seat, and approaching the door gazed without. The cold wind blew, and with a shudder she raised her hand to draw the cloak still more tightly around her throat. Whilst so occupied, her hand accidentally rubbed against the sleeve of her dress. It felt cold, and saturated with moisture. Instinctively she extended her arm, and advanced a little farther into the porch, when a sickening feeling of horror and dismay overpowered her, as she perceived that the whole lower part of the sleeve was stained of a deep red hue. For a moment she sank on the bench inside the porch; the next, she arose and returned to the place from which she had just risen. Close by, on the table, was another deep stain of blood, and then

another. Pale and immovable, Lady Catherine gazed, until, with an agonised exclamation of terror, she turned to seek refuge in flight, from the dark apprehension which goaded her spirit almost to madness. Once again she stood in the porch; but, as Helen had predicted, the rain now descended in torrents, while the distant roar of thunder reverberated in the surrounding hollows, and shook the frail bridge. The moon still shone with fitful glare, frequently obscured by black, opaque clouds, and the rain driven by the wind, drifted before her in swift, whirling circles, until the whole expanse of wood and water seemed wrapped in a whitened sheet of vapour. In mute terror, Lady Catherine stood on the threshold. Crash after crash of thunder rocked the hermitage to and fro; and the wind with sullen murmur fiercely tossed the branches, and whistled amid the foliage. Appalled by the unabated fury of the storm, Lady Catherine retreated into the hermitage; and closing the door, threw herself on her knees, and buried her face in her hands. The gloom gradually deepened, and save when a vivid flash of lightning illumined her place of refuge, only the faintest rays of light glimmered through the windows. She tried to collect her thoughts; but the excitement had been too great, and her mind wandered: taunting voices and mocking laughter sounded in her ears; and shudderingly she knelt motionless and paralysed, as the blast, with hoarse murmur, swept around.

At length the violence of the storm exhausted itself: gradually the thunder became fainter and fainter; the heavy clouds rolled away, and dispersed, and the moon once more rode triumphant in the heavens. Lady Catherine started up instantly, and threw open the door. The atmosphere was clearer, though still a small swift rain fell. Gathering her cloak round her, she resolved to take advantage of the lull to retrace her steps back to the house. As she reached the end of the bridge, the great clock struck one: she had just been absent an hour and a half. With the speed of lightning, she hurried onwards, and, excited and weary, at length reached the foot of the stairs leading to the balcony in Helen's apartment.

The latter, meanwhile, spent the period of Lady Catherine's absence in the wildest alarm. A thousand times during the continuance of the storm had she been tempted to despatch Wilmot in search of her mistress; but deterred by the recollection of Lady Catherine's determination and evident displeasure, when she ventured to remonstrate with her, she wandered restlessly up and down, listening in dire affright to the wind and pealing thunder, and forming vain conjectures as to where her friend would most probably find shelter. Seldom had Helen experienced a joy so fervent as when she

heard Lady Catherine's step on the balcony stairs : quickly she threw open the glass door.

"Catherine, thank God, I see you safe back again!" exclaimed she; "what a fearful storm! Surely you have not been exposed to its fury?"

Lady Catherine silently disengaged herself from Helen's arms. There was a fixedness on her pallid features, and a deep steady glare in her eyes, which made Helen tremble.

"Catherine, speak, I implore. Tell me, you are not hurt."

"I am perfectly well, Helen," replied Lady Catherine, shudderingly turning aside; "do not alarm yourself."

"Let me relieve you of this wet cloak. You will catch your death of cold if you persist in keeping it longer around you. Come to the fire, dearest Catherine," said Helen, soothingly, trying to unclasp the cloak, from which streams of water dripped on the floor.

Lady Catherine, however, hastily passed her, and went into the adjoining room. Helen, more and more astonished, lingered a moment to replace the shutter, and then followed her. She was standing before the fire, and the cloak had fallen from her shoulders on the hearth-rug. Her muslin dress clung around her figure in damp folds, splashed and spoiled. One sleeve was entirely rent away, baring her white, rounded arm nearly to the shoulder, and her hair, escaped from beneath her comb, hung in loose, dishevelled masses below her waist.

"Good Heavens, Catherine! What is this? You told me you were not hurt," suddenly exclaimed Helen, seizing her gown, and pointing to a dark red stain just below her arm. "Oh! Catherine, what is all this about? Why do you look so strange and wild?"

"Ask no questions, I implore you, Helen. Believe what you will; but no word of explanation passes my lips," exclaimed she, sternly. "Do I frighten you, Helen?" continued Lady Catherine, after a pause, with a sad smile, as the delicate muslin yielded to her impetuous grasp, and in another second the fire had consumed the tell-tale marks which excited Helen's horror. "Oh! Helen, may you never know that anguish which dooms the lips to silence, while the heart is breaking!"

And she knelt, and buried her throbbing brow in her hands. Helen threw her arm round her. Presently Lady Catherine's rigid despair began to yield: large tears coursed each other, at first slowly, down her cheeks; but the fountain once unsealed soon they streamed from her eyes, and she seemed to be weeping forth the very wildness and outpourings of her sorrow. Helen, unspeakably distressed, whispered every consolation that the tenderest sympathy could suggest, and soon,

like a child exhausted by the violence of its grief, Lady Catherine's sobs ceased ; and, save that now and then a sharp spasm passed over her, she sat motionless with her face still buried in her hands.

Suddenly she raised her head, and fixed her eyes steadily on Helen, who was still kneeling by her.

"Helen, I know that I have no right to extort a pledge from you, or to burden you with the weight of a secret ; but will you for ever insure my love and gratitude, by promising, on your most solemn word, to keep silence on everything which has befallen me this night ?" said Lady Catherine, with something of her old sternness of manner.

Helen reflected a moment.

"Do you hesitate, Helen ? Have I been deceived in your regard, your sympathy ?" resumed Lady Catherine, in agitated tones. "Would you add another pang to my already bitter destiny ?"

"No, Catherine. I was thinking whether I should not prove myself your truest friend by communicating what I know of this night's distressing events, to some one who could aid you by counsel or by active interference—to your guardian, for instance." Lady Catherine started violently. "But as I have no right to betray what you peremptorily desire me to conceal, I give you, though very reluctantly, the promise you ask. But suffer me, dear Catherine, I beseech you, this word of warning counsel——"

"Spare me, Helen ! Advice, counsel, even by my own most innate conviction of right, must bend to my irrevocable destiny ! One day you shall know all—and then I will ask you, not to pity me, but to acknowledge that, by a strange combination of circumstances, what now doubtless appears to you so reprehensible, may, after all, not only prove justifiable, but also have been the sole possible step the clearest sense of right could dictate."

Helen made no reply ; feeling that to argue with her friend in her excited state, when rest and quiet might, perhaps, be of vital consequence, would be worse than imprudent. Lady Catherine's room was not very distant from Helen's, and softly and warily they presently glided towards it. When they entered, both at first drew back in momentary alarm at the unexpected sight of Wilmot ; who, despite the orders she had received, sat stiff and upright in an arm-chair in front of a blazing fire, her small gray eyes exhibiting not the slightest token of fatigue. She rose as the young ladies advanced, shook her head reproachfully, and then bent a long scrutinising gaze on her mistress. Helen placed her finger on her lips ; then feeling quite satisfied in confiding her friend to the faithful care of Wilmot, she speedily regained her own apartment.

CHAPTER XXX.

MISS CAMPBELL KEEPS HER WORD.

THE following morning, Lady Catherine was too unwell to make her appearance at the breakfast-table. She had passed the night in brief snatches of restless disturbed slumber, and her wan looks, when daylight broke, bore strong evidence of the mental agitation of the preceding evening. Helen, who was early by Lady Catherine's bedside, was inexpressibly grieved at the languor which had suddenly stolen over her friend's beautiful features. Wilmot's deep sighs and solemn portentous shake of the head, added not a little to her alarm; and without hinting at her design, Helen thought it right to communicate to Mildred the serious indisposition of her guest. Accordingly, she proceeded at once to Lady Alresford's apartment; and soon returned with her. Lady Catherine, however, in reply to Mildred's earnest questions, persisted in ascribing her indisposition solely to a slight cold, and rejected almost peremptorily the united entreaty of both her friends, that she would summon medical aid; nor could they even induce her to delay her return to Wardour until the following day: a resolve in which, to Helen's surprise, she was warmly seconded by the cautious Wilmot.

Finding her entreaty vain, Lady Alresford, accompanied by Helen, presently descended to the breakfast-room; and again was Mildred more than ever astonished at the evident coldness with which the earl greeted her friend. Even towards the talkative Miss Tennyson, who sat on his right, Lord Alresford seemed more attentive and cordial. Mildred felt inexpressibly provoked; and inwardly accused her husband of cruel injustice in suffering her own deficiencies and shortcomings to influence his conduct towards Helen: especially in the presence of Sir Gerard Baynton and his mother. She was, however, somewhat pacified and consoled, when she perceived that Sir Gerard had contrived to insinuate himself into a chair next to Helen; and when Lady Emily, after expressing the highest admiration and affection for Miss Campbell, took an opportunity of asking her, with a meaning smile, whether she could spare her friend to pay a visit to the Chauntry. Mildred, with a glad glance at Helen's happy, blushing face, immediately replied in the affirmative, and begged Lady Emily to arrange the matter with Miss Campbell, which she promised to do.

The conversation, meanwhile, at the other end of the table, ran chiefly on the storm in the night, which had stripped the

trees of half their remnant of foliage, and covered the walks and lawns instead with leaves and boughs; diversified by sundry profound doubts and misgivings as to the state of the roads on the part of Sir Richard Tennyson. As for Clara, she was in high spirits, and talked to Mr. Turville in her most off-hand style, inviting him to visit Settringham, and Chartleigh also, after she got there herself; and ended by giving him a gratifying assurance of Mr. Frank Norwood's friendship. Mr. Turville listened with an air of most deferential attention, till his patience was saved severer trial by Miss Tennyson's ideas being turned into a different channel, on the appearance of her brother's phaeton at the door of the mansion. Sir Richard was in haste to reach home in time to greet a party of shooting friends at dinner that evening; as soon, therefore, as breakfast was over, he hurried away his sister; and it was with feelings of more satisfaction than he had experienced for many a day, that Lord Alresford handed the vivacious Miss Tennyson to her carriage. Sir Gerard and Lady Emily Baynton next took their departure; the latter having promised to drive over on some very early day, and fix with Helen when she was to visit the Chantry; and then came for Mildred the painful trial of bidding farewell to her parents. She felt that between herself and her loved mother, there had been a restraint during the whole of Lady Elvaston's visit, which ought not to have existed. She dared not confide the hopes and fears perpetually fluctuating in her mind; and yet as she hung upon her mother's neck, and knew that she was suffering her to depart in sorrowful uncertainty, most fervent at the time were Mildred's good resolves, that if it depended only on her, joyous, indeed, should be their next meeting; when, all misunderstanding swept away, she would greet her as the happy wife of Lord Alresford.

Scarce had Mildred recovered her composure and joined the party again, when Lady Catherine made her appearance. The colour suffused her cheek as she greeted her cousin, Mr. Turville, who had lingered expressly to see her before taking his departure; then, fearful lest he should offer her his escort, Lady Catherine hurriedly requested Lady Alresford and Helen to accompany her home. Mildred assented; but Helen excused herself on the plea of having letters to write; but, in reality, she panted for retirement and leisure to compose her thoughts: to sober, if possible, the feeling of new, inexpressible happiness which fluttered at her heart. Mr. Turville, perceiving that Lady Catherine was not disposed to yield him a more kind or flattering attention than had been her wont of late, soon rose and took his leave, and then Mildred quitted the room to prepare for her drive. Lady Catherine sat for a long time in silence: her eyes bent on the carpet.

"Helen," at length said she, in her soft, melodious voice, "I allude once more to the events of last night, to tell you that I shall never forget your kindness and sympathy. Although I foresee that it will not be long ere you have a home of your own in this neighbourhood, dear Helen, yet, before that time arrives, let me sometimes share your society with Mildred. Promise me that you will come to Wardour Court."

"I shall like to do so more than I can express, Catherine," rejoined Helen, quickly; for Lord Alresford's evident prejudice had often been to her the subject of painful meditation: she knew that she could not have given him personal offence, and therefore concluded his dislike most probably arose from distrust of her influence over Lady Alresford. Lady Catherine's cordial invitation seemed now to remove the difficulty over which she had so long pondered; she could still see Mildred, and enjoy her society for some time, without remaining for any lengthened period the earl's guest.

"Well, Helen, this is settled. Remember, the doors of Wardour are from henceforth open to you whenever and for as long as you will. Should any unforeseen event take the Alresfords from this place, you must immediately come to me; though otherwise, I suppose, Mildred will not relinquish your society for many weeks to come?"

"No; I think I cannot leave Amesbury at present——" replied Helen, pausing, as Mildred and Mrs. Otway entered; and about a quarter of an hour afterwards Lady Catherine took her departure.

Helen sat at the window for some time pensively over her work. Without, beautiful woods, variegated already with autumnal tints, clothed the undulating glades and dells of the park, and the bright, cheerful sun poured into the room, harmonising with the happiness which pervaded her heart. She knew she was beloved, and that ere long Sir Gerard would speak those words which should for ever unite them. Gradually dreams of bliss stole over her fancy, and for the first time she allowed her thoughts to dwell on the felicity of becoming his wife. Unconsciously, the work glided from her hand; a smile parted her lips, and her cheek, as she recalled every word, every look, glowed with fitful, passing hues. Not that in this retrospect she thought of Sir Gerard's rank and wealth as additional subjects of gratulation, save only as the medium through which she might shower benefits on those she loved. As the beloved wife of Sir Gerard Baynton, the thought would now and then intrude of the splendid reception she would then give her parents and her brothers at her new home; but further than this, her anticipated elevation never betrayed her. Won by Sir Gerard's devotion, almost from the very commencement of their renewed intercourse, Helen had

given her heart unreservedly ; though conscious that his position entitled him to look higher than herself in his choice of a wife, for a long time she scarcely admitted his sway over her mind, even in her own secret communings. Had Sir Gerard been unprincipled, and merely sought to diversify a six weeks' spell in the country by a flirtation with the curate's daughter, Helen might bitterly have rued the day when the kindness of Lady Elvaston brought her to associate intimately with those whose equal she was in mind and talent ; nay, in everything save that touchstone of the world's pride and exclusiveness—social position.

After a time, Helen awoke from her reverie, and drawing her desk towards her, commenced a letter to her mother. Half a dozen sheets were speedily written upon and rejected, until at last, with a smile at the heap of fragments by her side, she gave up the attempt in despair. She passed into the adjoining saloon, loitered a few seconds at the table, and then, throwing up the window, walked into the conservatory. She thought of all Sir Gerard had there said ; and his tones again rang in her ears. The beautiful white rosebud over which she had bent the night before had blown, and now expanded its snowy petals to catch the warm sunbeam. She wandered further, and stood by the group of stately daturas, each incident of the preceding evening vividly recurring to her fancy. That exquisite gush of rapture which follows the consciousness of a first and reciprocal love is a joy felt but once, and only once, in all its purity and intensity : so Helen strolled along, her calm, gentle eyes expressing something of the harmony and content which filled her soul. After some time she returned to the drawing-room, and re-seated herself near the deep bay window. She felt too absorbed, too happy, to work or read. Few and rare are the intervals in life when we can summon our thoughts as our pleasantest companions ; when retrospect brings us nought to disquiet, and the future glows brightly, so that we even dare anticipate its joys. With her elbow leaning on the window-seat, and her forehead resting in the palm of her hand, Helen remained buried in reverie, nor did she raise her head until the door opened, and a servant entered the room.

"My lord, Madam, desires his compliments, and will be glad to speak with Miss Campbell for a few minutes in the library," said the man, immediately retiring.

In a moment, Helen's happy dreams vanished. What could Lord Alresford have to say of sufficient moment to request a private conference ? Though Helen's pristine admiration of the earl still remained in full force, it was shadowed by a little tinge of pique, that he appeared so pertinaciously to undervalue and slight her friendship. She had made great

efforts to obtain his esteem, and she felt both sorrow and vexation that hitherto, most undeservedly on her part, she had failed in her attempts. However, with a perfectly guileless conscience, she now arose to grant the interview solicited by the earl; and, womanlike, first approached a mirror, and smoothed the glossy bands of hair on her temples. As she thus stood, the thought darted through her brain, that Lord Alresford's request might possibly have some relation with Lady Catherine's extraordinary *escapade* of the preceding night. Helen's cheek turned very pale, for on this mysterious rendezvous her lips were sealed. Nevertheless, without further hesitation, she resolutely proceeded to the library: though we do not assert that poor Helen's heart, which but a few minutes before glowed with such pleasurable emotion, did not throb more tumultuously than was its wont, as she laid her hand on the door and entered the apartment. Lord Alresford was standing with his back to the fire, apparently awaiting her presence. The same gravity, which in her light-heartedness she had scarcely remarked at breakfast, still hung on his brow, nor was she long in divining its cause; for in passing the mantelpiece, to take possession of the chair that the earl drew forwards for her, her eye fell on the clasp, which in an instant she remembered she had lent to Lady Catherine to fasten her cloak with. It was a beautiful agate in a plain gold setting, a present, as was before stated, from the earl, and until this moment Helen had been unconscious of its loss. Lord Alresford observed the rush of colour to her cheek, as her eye glanced on the brooch.

"I see, Miss Campbell, you recognise an old friend in this brooch. Were you aware of its loss?" said he, gently and seriously, placing it in her hand.

"No, Lord Alresford," replied Helen, mechanically taking the brooch. She felt what was impending, and her pure spirit recoiled from the ordeal. She was guiltless, and yet she dare not assert her innocence.

"When did you last wear it, Miss Campbell? There are circumstances connected with the finding of this brooch, which I would give much to hear satisfactorily explained," resumed the earl, in the same kind tones.

"What circumstances?" asked Helen, faintly, resolved to hear how far she was implicated.

Lord Alresford looked surprised, and continued in drier tones:—

"Certainly, Miss Campbell, if you desire this detail, I am ready to give it, though I had hoped the painful task might have been spared me." The earl paused. Helen sat motionless. "In the first place, then, the brooch was brought to me this morning by one of the gardeners, who found it, half

concealed in the grass, near a clump of evergreens in the cedar walk. According to my usual practice, I spent some time in this room last night, after everyone had retired ; when, tempted by the beauty of the night, I opened the window, and strolled in the direction of the cedar-grove. I had not proceeded far when my attention was aroused by the sound of footsteps along the walk parallel to that I was pursuing, which happened to be the beech walk next to the park. In some parts of this walk, the trees, as you are aware, are very slenderly planted, and through several gaps I obtained a full view of the trespasser ; who was apparently making rapidly in the direction of one of the lodges. I followed this person at some distance to the Avington gate, and then I distinctly heard the sound of carriage wheels along the road. Is this enough, Miss Campbell, or shall I proceed ?" asked the earl, suddenly pausing, and fixing his eyes earnestly on her face.

Helen merely bowed her head.

"Then followed the storm, Miss Campbell. I watched its progress from this room—the least familiar, probably, to you of any in the house. Perhaps you do not know that one of these windows commands a full view of the balcony in front of your apartment ?" said Lord Alresford, in tones of increased severity.

Lord Alresford had then witnessed the departure and return of Lady Catherine, whom he took for herself : nor could she marvel at the mistake in the uncertain moonlight, for their height was nearly the same, and the illusion doubtless riveted by Lady Catherine issuing from her chamber, clad also in her bonnet and cloak. Every link of evidence seemed complete, but too surely to convict her ; and she, even in self-vindication, was bound to silence. She had pledged her sacred word not to betray her friend, and by that promise she must, therefore, abide. Overpowered by the semblance of guilt, Helen actually shuddered beneath the deep scrutinising glance bent upon her. Lord Alresford awaited with patient determination until she collected herself sufficiently to reply.

"And you saw some one either return or depart by that balcony, whom you think resembled me ? Is it not so, my lord ?" said she at length proudly, raising her eyes to the earl's face.

"Think !" I saw you return from the garden, Miss Campbell. This fact unhappily will admit of no refutation ; though I fain hoped, from the high opinion I had formed of your character, and from that I heard others express, a few words from you might satisfactorily explain this affair. Now, I ask you, Miss Campbell, whether you can deny a single particle of what I have advanced ?"

"I will neither deny nor affirm anything, Lord Alresford, but that I am not guilty of what you infer ; and I must de-

cline answering any questions on the subject," replied Helen hurriedly, though she raised her clear, truthful eyes from the ground, upon which they had been steadily bent, and fixed them on the earl's face.

"You have, I know, Miss Campbell, a seeming right to set my questions at defiance; but I will tell you the grounds on which alone I justify my interference in your concerns. As the chosen friend and companion of Lady Alresford, I feel bound to investigate your conduct in this affair. It would pain me deeply, besides, to suppose Miss Campbell guilty of clandestine intrigue; or still more, of the dishonourable conduct of heartlessly encouraging the attention of my friend Sir Gerard Baynton only to betray him," said the earl, indignantly.

Helen writhed under the force of this insinuation. Her cheek, neck, and brow flushed, and spite of her fortitude, showers of tears poured down her face.

"Believe it not, Lord Alresford! I am not guilty of this deception. I may not disclose more; though I conjure you to believe me innocent of that you insinuate!" exclaimed she, imploringly, clasping her hands.

Lord Alresford appeared surprised at her vehemence.

"Do I rightly understand, Miss Campbell, that you deny having quitted your apartment last night?" asked he, at length.

"I am not at liberty to offer any explanation on the subject," repeated she, faintly, covering her face with her hands.

"Then excuse me, Miss Campbell, the presumption must be against you. I cannot disbelieve what I witnessed——"

"Lord Alresford!" interrupted Helen, vehemently, starting from her seat, "I have not done this evil thing which you suspect. On my sole unsupported assertion, you must believe me. Have you sufficient confidence in my integrity?"

The earl shook his head and turned aside.

"Against other testimony than the undoubted evidence of my senses, I might, perhaps, have placed implicit reliance on your assurances, Miss Campbell."

A look of despairing resolution passed over Helen's pale face.

"As you believe me guilty of such dissembling, Lord Alresford, I will no longer remain an inmate of your house. Some day you will render me justice; and perhaps, when too late, regret the injury you may have done me. I shall return home to-morrow," said she, haughtily and indignantly, though every now and then her words were choked by tears.

Lord Alresford remained silent for a few moments: painful ones were they for Helen, with her candid, frank sincerity of character.

"Under present circumstances, I cannot request you, Miss Campbell, to reconsider your determination," at length rejoined the earl. "You have great influence over Lady Alresford; and, believing that of your conduct which I am bound to do until you prove to me otherwise, I may not conscientiously ask you to remain longer her guest. But is it, indeed, totally impossible to induce you to put confidence in me? Will you not suffer me to be your friend in this affair, Miss Campbell? Remember, a word spoken in season often saves endless misery. Cannot you take a lesson from Mildred's history, and beware in time of the pernicious habit of culpable concealment? Pause, ere you finally decide, Miss Campbell, on quitting my roof with this stigma on your conduct. If all be right as you tell me, consider whether, after the hopes you have given Sir Gerard Baynton, you are warranted in refusing an explanation of this suspicious circumstance; for I will not hide from you my determination, after what has passed between you here, to avow fully and openly to my friend the causes which led to the abrupt termination of your visit."

A slight shiver passed over Helen's frame. If her cup of sorrow were not before full, the drop was now added which should send it brimming over; for the thought, indeed, filled her with anguish that Sir Gerard should be taught to believe her guilty and unfaithful, from the all persuasive lips of Lord Alresford.

"But if you were bound to another by a solemn pledge of secrecy, my lord, how would you act?" asked Helen, desperately, raising her face, pale as ashes, from her folded hands.

"Another, Miss Campbell!" A dark shadow crossed the earl's brow, and he appeared lost in thought for a few seconds. Presently he resumed, in his ordinary tone and manner.

"Either you are acting in good faith, or treacherously by my friend, Miss Campbell. If the former, you ought not to have made this promise. No one can, or has the right to impose such an extent of self-sacrifice; and if you take my advice, you will disregard, under the circumstances, a pledge which ought never to have been exacted."

Helen felt the truth of these words: her promise, and above all the remembrance of Lady Catherine's despair, and her actual ignorance of the extent to which a frank avowal might compromise her friend, closed her lips. She knew that by resolutely refusing to answer the earl's inquiries, she was casting happiness from her, perhaps, for ever; yet Lady Catherine had quitted Amesbury confiding in her honour, in the full and entire security that her secret was safe. She could not betray her, let the consequences be what they might. The earl's words

and counsel rang in her ears, for his voice admonished her to do that which her own inward sense of rectitude prompted ; yet, from a refinement of generosity, and a sacred reverence for her promise, Helen refrained.

"Lord Alresford," at length said she, firmly and mournfully, "I would give much, *very much* to reinstate myself in your esteem. On the events of last night, I am bound to be silent. The happy day may not be far distant when I may clear myself in your opinion ; nor will I, until then, complain of the severity with which I have been condemned upon mere presumption ! I shall leave Amesbury to-morrow," added she, with somewhat of hauteur in her tone and manner, as she arose to depart.

The earl merely bowed ; yet Helen, as she timidly raised her eyes to his, thought that she discovered the expression of real sorrow and concern on his face.

"One word more, Miss Campbell. Had Lady Alresford any knowledge of what occurred last night ? "

"Not the slightest, my lord. I never spoke to Lady Alresford from the time I quitted the drawing-room yesterday evening, until a few minutes before we entered the breakfast-room together this morning," replied she, emphatically, walking composedly past the earl out of the room.

As soon, however, as she heard the library-door close, Helen swiftly darted forwards, and bounding up the staircase, hastily locked the door of her room, and throwing herself in a chair, buried her face in her hands. Her faculties seemed stunned with the suddenness of the disgrace which had befallen her. Her mind, for a season, appeared incapable of performing its functions, and for a long, long time, Helen could but weep in the very bewilderment of anguish. Her first outburst of sorrow over, she arose and calmly began to consider her position. She remembered that she had pledged herself to leave the earl's house on the morrow ; nor did Helen regret her act, while calmly reviewing her conduct. She felt indignant, wounded to the quick, that Lord Alresford had judged her so harshly, and that her reiterated assurances of innocence scarce moved his incredulity ; and she justly considered that, lowered as she was in his esteem, it would inflict too intolerable a humiliation to remain longer his guest. Once Helen seized her pen to address an earnest appeal to Lady Catherine to come to her rescue, and clear her from the painful suspicion ; but she felt the utter hopelessness of this course. She recalled the start of keen apprehension with which, on the preceding evening, Lady Catherine received her advice to confide the mystery to the earl. Another powerful reason operated, also, to induce her to lay aside her pen ; which was the conviction, that Lady Catherine, when informed of the sudden termination of her visit at Ames-

bury, would importunately entreat her to remove to Wardour. Helen's native delicacy of mind revolted at the idea of remaining in Sir Gerard's neighbourhood, under the grave stigma which Lord Alresford would not fail to avow. She felt that total absence were preferable to encountering his altered eye, or Lady Emily's reproachful glance: she might not confide the secret of her innocence to Sir Gerard's ear; better, therefore, that the keen trial of meeting in coldness and alienation should be spared them. Though Helen trusted that speedily Lady Catherine's high sense of generosity would clear her from blame, yet she determined it should be from the bosom of her own dear home that her earnest appeal to her should be addressed. She would not linger at Wardour Court, apparently awaiting Sir Gerard's decision; yet the thought of his sorrow, his reproach, threw her into an agony of grief. Poor Helen! how had the short space of two hours changed the current of her thoughts! When she arose they were joyous, brilliant with hope; but now, like a dark cloud on the blue sky of April, unmerited disgrace had marred and swept them away, and she drooped under the menaced storm.

More and more, as Helen reflected, did she become convinced that her decision was right. She now laboured, however, under a sense of injury, which, perhaps, imparted more warmth and energy to her thoughts and actions; yet tears dropped fast from her eyes as she arose and collected together various little articles dispersed over the room, preparatory to beginning her packing operations for her journey on the morrow. She was anxious to make some progress before Mildred's return, for she guessed what would be the vehemence of her remonstrance and regret.

Helen had been thus occupied for about an hour, when she heard Lady Alresford's hasty step in the corridor, and in another instant Mildred stood before her door demanding admittance. Slowly Helen complied; the bed, the tables were covered with the contents of her wardrobe, and a large, open trunk, half filled, stood in the centre of the room. Mildred paused in astonishment.

"Good Heavens, Helen! what does all this mean?" exclaimed she, breathlessly.

"Simply, dearest Mildred, that I must leave you to-morrow. Sit down, and I will explain the wonderful revolution in my destiny since your departure," replied Helen, striving to repress her tears.

Lady Alresford passively complied, and Helen shortly related the charge against her, her inability to refute it, and consequent determination. Frequent and passionate were Mildred's interruptions; and fervently did she now admonish Helen of the danger of concealment. Firmly, however, Miss Campbell re-

sisted her endearments, reproaches, and exhortations, until exhausted, choked with tears, Mildred flew from the room, and took refuge in her boudoir. From thence, in a very few minutes, Helen beheld her pass her room again; she heard her hurried step on the stairs, and felt convinced that she had gone to plead her cause with the earl. Presently Lady Alresford re-passed again, and Helen saw nothing more of her until dinner.

Never meal passed more uncomfortably for poor Mildred since she became mistress of Amesbury. Her own eyes were heavy with weeping; Helen looked pale and resolute; the earl, serious and unbending; and, as a natural consequence of this state of affairs, conversation proceeded at the rate of a word every ten minutes. Vainly Lady Alresford watched the countenances of her companions to detect the slightest trace of relenting on either. Never did she more bitterly rue her alienation from her husband's confidence than on this evening; it bereft her of half her weapons in Helen's cause. Her own positive conviction of her friend's innocence in this mysterious affair was unclouded by a particle of doubt, and after their short stay in the dining-room, never did advocate seek more arduously to draw forth admissions in his client's favour, than did Mildred subtly strive to wrest from Helen some testimony for her vindication. She plied her with the most ingenious questions, dexterously left the subject for a few minutes, only to return to it with renewed vigour, then put seemingly indifferent queries, and drew her own conclusions.

Helen felt that to preserve Lady Catherine's secret intact required all her vigilance and skill; and glad to obtain a few moments' repose, she strolled into the conservatory, and sought out again the fair, white rose. Nothing but its green leaves now met her view, and Helen, as she approached, saw that the ground around was strewn with delicate transparent petals.

It had fallen—and, like her own hope, prematurely withered.

She stooped, hastily gathered together the snowy leaves, and then returned to the room. Mildred, however, had vanished, and Helen, not being especially desirous of another *tête-à-tête* with Lord Alresford, swiftly followed her example. As she approached her room, she heard Lady Alresford's voice within, in very earnest conference with Aglaë. The latter, on Miss Campbell's entrance, instantly resumed her occupation of packing; but Helen thought that Mildred's manner seemed more cheerful, and that she spoke with less restraint of her approaching departure on the morrow. Astonished at this change, Helen vainly taxed her recollection, fearing lest she had been betrayed into some undue admissions; but con-

science fully acquitted her of any breach of promise to Lady Catherine, nor did Mildred resume the subject until they sat alone that night, during their long and last vigil in the boudoir.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE VILLAGE GOSSIP.

EARLY the following morning, Helen arose and prepared for her immediate departure ; not choosing to undergo the painful restraint of meeting Lord Alresford again. Sadly, Mildred and she lingered over the breakfast-table ; few words were exchanged between them, for each felt that there was something she might not speak. At length Aglaë terminated this painful interview by entering to announce that the carriage to convey Miss Campbell to Avington was at the door. Helen arose ; she struggled for firmness—and tears rolled down her cheeks.

“You will write very soon, Helen ; and tell Mrs. Campbell not to distress herself, for I am much mistaken if this temporary shadow does not bring out your character, my Helen, in its brightest hues. However, I will write and tell her so myself,” said Mildred, as arm-in-arm they traversed the hall ; for Lady Alresford was resolved to see the last of her friend, though fear lest her husband might construe it into an indirect censure of his conduct, prevented her from accompanying Helen to Avington.

Helen, however, through Mildred, had had the offer of various escorts home from the earl. He desired that either Aglaë or the housekeeper should be at Miss Campbell's command to attend her to Greysdon ; but Helen firmly declined their services, resolved to wend her way back home alone : especially as she did not choose that any of the inmates of Amesbury should witness the astonishment and consternation her sudden return might occasion. Involuntarily, a deep feeling of sadness crept over her heart, as the carriage rolled away. As long as the mansion was visible, Helen could descry Mildred's figure at the door ; and imagination pictured the regret which shadowed her face, as she stood waving her handkerchief until the carriage disappeared. Helen sighed, too, as she looked around on the fair scene she was so suddenly leaving ; on the beautiful park glades, half shadow, half sunshine, with dew trembling in glittering drops on the tender blades of grass,

gently agitated as the soft wind crept with musical murmur amid the foliage already tinged with the golden hues of autumn. When the lodge gates were passed, the long undulating line of woods to the left she knew sheltered the Chauntry. A heavy purple mist hung over them, though here and there bright patches of sunshine rested on the topmost branches of the trees, rendering the gloom beneath still more striking and picturesque. An indescribable sensation of depression overpowered poor Helen; she sank back in the carriage; nor was she roused from her reverie until the clatter of the wheels on the pavement of the little market town of Avington reminded her that she must be near her destination,—the railway station. To her infinite joy, there was no one she recognised on the platform: at that early hour, it was scarcely probable there should be; so she quietly stepped into one of the carriages, and a few minutes afterwards, bade adieu to the county of D—shire.

Helen's thoughts, as she was impelled along, were not of the most enviable description. Mildred's affection, however, and whispered parting words, afforded much consolation; besides which, her trust in Lady Catherine's generosity never once forsook her, nor the hope that when informed of the suffering entailed by her faithful adherence to her promise, the latter would afford such an explanation to the earl, as should satisfactorily clear her from suspicion. As she journeyed on, musing on the one untoward circumstance that filled her spirit with sadness, Helen thought not on the smaller though still galling annoyances to which her sudden and unexpected return would subject her. She had yet to realise and to endure also the perpetual flurry of her mother's restless inquiries and unceasing activity to discover that which her daughter felt herself bound to conceal; to suffer the daily annoyance of the petty gossip and insinuations of the village notabilities, all more or less jealous of her intimacy with the family at the Priory: to say nothing of the more cold, politely expressed surprise of their county neighbours. Every sorrow, however, appeared to vanish for the moment, when Helen, after a wearisome journey, beheld the gray spire of the village church of Greysdon, and passed its pretty cottages, covered with creepers and trellis-work.

As she approached her home, a feeling of inexpressible anxiety took possession of her heart. She wondered what her father, her mother, and Colin would say to her abrupt appearance amongst them; especially with the unsatisfactory explanation of its cause, which it was in her power to offer. To her father, however, Helen had resolved to impart all she knew. She trusted implicitly to his discretion and respect for her solemn promise of secrecy, while placing unbounded re-

liance on his advice. She felt she was scarcely justified in carrying the suspicion to her parents' bosom, that their beloved daughter had indeed committed herself; or to return and sadden their happy home by a painful, mysterious silence. Her father's assurance and approval of her conduct, she knew, would set her mother's mind at rest; indeed, she looked principally to him for support and sympathy in the affliction which had so unexpectedly befallen her.

The back of Mr. Campbell's house faced the village street, and Helen, when she arrived at the gates leading into the yard, stopped the fly which had conveyed her from Stanmore; then giving the man directions to drive in and set down her luggage, she sprang from the carriage, and opened the garden-gate. The garden her mother loved so well, looked blooming almost as when she left it. The brightest flowers of the season adorned the borders, and the verdure of the smoothly-mown lawn was not marred even by a single stray leaf. She looked up at the house; the windows of her own bed-room were closed, and the blinds carefully drawn down. Helen's silent observations, however, were soon interrupted by the appearance of her mother in her gardening costume. Mrs. Campbell paused and looked earnestly at the figure advancing towards her; not at once recognising Helen, who was muffled in a veil and large shawl, and a look of displeasure swept over her face, for Mrs. Campbell greatly disapproved of any casual comers intruding into the garden. She accordingly stood stock-still, with a very stately air, awaiting the approach of the presumptuous personage steadily wending her way towards her. Colin, meanwhile, who delighted to listen to the dignified rebukes administered by his mother to the unhappy individuals unendowed with the happy faculty of discriminating between the front and the back doors, arose from his chair and approached the window.

"Mother, mother!" exclaimed he, after gazing earnestly for a second, "where can your eyes be? Don't you see that it is Helen—darling Helen—come back again?" and the next instant the impetuous boy bounded forwards, and clasped his sister in his arms.

"Helen! Impossible, Colin! And yet,—good gracious, it must be she! Helen, my child! how in the world do you come here?" exclaimed Mrs. Campbell breathlessly, as she too folded her daughter in her embrace.

"Mamma, are you glad—very glad to see me?" asked Helen, hiding her face on her mother's bosom, to conceal the tears which involuntarily started in her eyes.

"Glad! To be sure. What a silly girl you are to agitate yourself thus, my dear!" said Mrs. Campbell, fondly kissing her daughter's forehead. "But I want to know, Helen, what

makes you pop upon us so unexpectedly? I suppose your friends, weary already of Amesbury, are come back to the Priory; and yet I saw Mrs. Slater this morning, and she never hinted at such an event, which I should think would require at least a week's preparation: that is, to get everything comfortably arranged in the house again——”

“Do leave Mrs. Slater and her preparations, mother, and let us hear what brings Helen back so suddenly. Something painful has happened, I am certain, from your pale cheek, my darling Helen; so tell us at once,” interposed Colin, whose sharp ears had caught the sound of wheels in the adjoining yard, and the lumbering down of trunks and packages.

At this moment Mr. Campbell, attracted by the unusual din of voices without, appeared at the study window. Helen, as soon as she perceived her father, darted forwards and threw herself into his arms.

“My darling child! what is the meaning of this your sudden return, though not less welcome? Surely nothing has happened to Mildred?” exclaimed Mr. Campbell.

“Come, Helen, take off your bonnet, and let us hear all about it,” said Mrs. Campbell, following her daughter into the room, and closing the window. “Who did you travel with, my dear?”

“I travelled alone, mamma,” replied Helen, feeling, if she did not look, terribly embarrassed.

“Alone!” and Mrs. Campbell cast a scrutinising glance on her daughter.

“Do not keep us longer in suspense, my dear Helen, but tell us what brings you so suddenly home again,” said Mr. Campbell.

Helen paused, irresolute, for a few moments: she knew not how to broach the subject. She dreaded her mother's persevering inquiries: besides which, Helen was not one of those heroines who endure with a kind of proud, silent triumph, undeserved censure, complacent in the contemplation of their injured innocence; and she naturally shrunk from detailing the little she felt at liberty to do, until she had poured the whole history into her father's ear, and had secured his sanction of her conduct throughout the affair.

“Mamma,” at length she began, “there are some very painful events connected with my sudden return, which I feel sure will greatly rouse your indignation: besides, the worst part of the business is, that I am bound by a solemn promise not to betray those facts which ought, and doubtless would, set the matter in its proper light.”

Helen paused abruptly. Mrs. Campbell looked at her husband, and her brow slightly contracted.

“I don't understand what you mean, Helen,” replied she,

sharply. "If you have got into a scrape, and are in possession of the information which will set you right again, you cannot be so absurd as to talk of such nonsense as 'solemn promises' in an affair of this kind."

"If I might speak a few words first alone with papa, I will tell you afterwards, dearest mamma, everything I feel at liberty to detail; and even then I think you will not blame me. Do not be alarmed, dear mamma! I hope, nay, I feel almost certain, that this shadow will prove but a temporary one."

"Certainly, Helen, I will leave you alone with your father, if you desire it; though I do not see why this ridiculous mystery should be concealed from me," exclaimed Mrs. Campbell, with rising colour. "I have as great a right to know your concerns as your father."

"Mamma, if you talk in this way you will break my heart. 'Tis not that I wish to conceal anything from you; but I have suffered much already to keep my promise, and it is your love for me that I dread. You would, I know, suffer no considerations to prevent you making my justification known to Lord Alresford," exclaimed Helen, excitedly, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"At any rate, let me speak with Helen first, my dear. Her principles are such that I feel convinced, whatever this affair may be, she has acted therein conscientiously and well: therefore, why should you increase her sorrow by needless reproach?" said Mr. Campbell, with more energy than was his wont.

Colin Campbell, who lounged against the mantelpiece attentively regarding his sister, here deliberately opened the window, and walked away into the garden.

"I will go in a moment, Mr. Campbell," replied his wife, somewhat cooled by the sight of Helen's tears. "So it is Lord Alresford you have offended, my dear! I never could endure the sight of him, with his haughty supercilious condescensions. I wish Amesbury had been far enough off, before you had gone there. Did the earl give you your *congé*, Helen?"

"No; I quitted Amesbury of my own free will and deed: but I am also bound to add, Lord Alresford made no effort to induce me to alter my determination," replied Helen, proudly.

"One question more before I leave you, Helen. Has your sudden return anything to do with Sir Gerard Baynton?" and Mrs. Campbell fixed her eyes with piercing, anxious scrutiny on her daughter's face.

"Not in the least, mamma. We parted on most friendly terms," replied Helen, promptly; though a pang shot across her heart, as she thought on the probable coldness of his greeting and manner, could they now have met.

"Well, I am glad of that. Sir Gerard, with his warm, frank disposition, is worth fifty fastidious Lord Alresfords! I am sure I pity Mildred from the bottom of my heart. She could not have done worse had she married Colonel Sutherland. Now, my dear, I will leave you with your father. But make haste, for of course I am impatient to learn what I may of this silly mystery. You will find me in the greenhouse;" and affectionately kissing her daughter's flushed cheek, Mrs. Campbell left the room.

Helen then, in a few simple words, after binding her father to secrecy, related the whole of her adventure with Lady Catherine, and her subsequent interview with the earl. Mr. Campbell listened attentively, and at first was disposed to blame Lord Alresford for unnecessary severity; but Helen completely exonerated him from any intentional harshness. She represented that, to a man of the earl's strict notion of propriety, her conduct must appear inexcusable; inasmuch that, as he had afforded her every opportunity for self-justification, and had even urged it on a plea he well might deem unanswerable, she had declined all explanation: therefore, far from suspecting Lady Catherine, he had every reason for supposing that the culprit of the midnight walk was herself. Mr. Campbell at first would not acquiesce in the force of this argument; though he greatly applauded Helen's firmness, in preserving Lady Catherine's secret under the pressure of so heavy a temptation.

Not entering into that refined delicacy of feeling which prompted Helen to quit Amesbury, rather than remain in Sir Gerard Baynton's neighbourhood with a stigma on her fair fame, Mr. Campbell, like most other people speaking on the first impulse, expressed, also, amazement that she had not appealed to the candour and justice of Lady Catherine, to confess at least so much as would be sufficient to reinstate her in the earl's good opinion; a duty so manifest that he felt persuaded, however humiliating the task, she would at once have complied. Helen was not so sanguine on this point; from Lady Catherine's agitation, a secret conviction arose in her mind, that the mystery was one which might require some struggles and self-sacrifice to divulge. She knew not Lady Catherine well enough to appreciate her strength of character and unfaltering self-forgiveness; which, when another's interest or happiness was concerned, induced her to reject every personal consideration.

Long did Mr. Campbell and his daughter discuss, and various were their surmises on the motives of Lady Catherine's conduct. Helen felt unspeakable comfort from the approval bestowed on her conduct by her beloved father. Mr. Campbell, however, though he spoke cheerfully, and for Helen's

sake (whose pale cheek attested how much she had suffered) held out encouraging hope that all might soon be well again, felt most profoundly grieved and annoyed at the suspicion resting on his darling Helen ; and no little irritation, despite his better judgment, lurked at heart against Lord Alresford, for his share in her undeserved disgrace. Though far from entering into his wife's tortuous schemes for the establishment of her children, Mr. Campbell had allowed himself to dwell, with more complacency than his better reason sanctioned, on Sir Gerard Baynton's presumed attachment to Helen ; and this violent interruption of their intercourse, on grounds little creditable to the latter, brought a keener pang than poor Helen, who anxiously watched every turn of her father's countenance, could divine.

Though Mr. Campbell approved, and felt no little pride in his daughter's firm reverence for her word, he thought she had carried her heroism far enough, and that Lady Catherine ought now to bear the penalty of her own rashness or indiscretion. Accordingly before their long conference ended, Helen, at her father's desire, wrote to Lady Catherine of all that had passed at Amesbury since her departure thence ; concluding with a short though emphatic entreaty that she would devise some method of convincing Lord Alresford of her innocence. Mr. Campbell promised to see this letter safely posted : and then Helen hurried to her own room, to collect her thoughts, and to snatch five minutes' repose ere she subjected herself again to her mother's searching queries.

Mrs. Campbell having given several very significant signs of fierce impatience, by pacing hastily past the study window some four or five times during their conference, Mr. Campbell at his daughter's request, before proceeding on his errand into the village, joined his wife on the lawn ; and after assuring her of his unequivocal approbation of Helen's conduct, and her total innocence of anything that could justify her banishment from Amesbury, left her in a perfect blaze of wrath against the earl.

As for Helen, never had she cast so melancholy a gaze round her neat, comfortable little room, as she did now on taking refuge within it. Not that she sighed after the luxury of the apartment she had so lately inhabited : no, she heeded not such things ; but her heart was sad, and she wept under the burden of the unmerited obloquy which had marred her dearest hope. Had her accuser been other than Lord Alresford, Helen fancied that she could have borne the trial more philosophically. What would be Sir Gerard's course ? He had as yet no right to ask that explanation of her conduct refused to the earl ; would he then give her up on a suspicion grounded on evidence apparently so unimpeachable ? Bitter

and perplexing were the doubts and fears which caused poor Helen's tears to flow with a hopelessness she had never before experienced: and she sat absorbed in sorrowful reverie, until roused by her mother's voice beneath her window, who besought her to come down immediately. Helen involuntarily sighed, as she arose and descended to the garden.

Mrs. Campbell was there parading up and down in a high state of excitement; every now and then relieving her overwrought feelings by pausing and pouring forth her indignation to Colin, who was busily engaged constructing a fanciful border of wood-work on the lawn. As soon, however, as he perceived his sister, to Helen's infinite delight, he left his work and came to meet her; and well was it that he did so, for her spirits were in no condition to contend with her mother's towering indignation; especially when she learned the particulars of her interview with Lord Alresford. Colin very often and successfully interposed a word, in his dry abrupt manner, which helped her on, and diverted Mrs. Campbell's ideas: the latter, however, was not a woman to exhaust herself in words. When the first explosion of her anger was spent, Mrs. Campbell set herself resolutely to consider who was the heroine of the nocturnal ramble, if her daughter were not, of which fact she was perfectly convinced. Resolving that Helen's hopes in Sir Gerard Baynton should not be destroyed by what she termed "romantic nonsense," and despairing of eliciting the truth by fair means, never did officer of detective force set about the discovery of hidden mystery more skilfully than Mrs. Campbell. She did not alarm her daughter by coming directly to the point; but she doubled, she rounded, she receded, and put such a host of seemingly irrelevant questions, that more than once during the evening Helen raised her eyes with a puzzled expression, wondering what her mother's drift could possibly be.

In the first instance, Mrs. Campbell's suspicions vigorously affixed themselves on Mildred; but even had not her secret misgiving been shaken by the result of Helen's cross-examination, she would have felt too much ashamed of her doubts to communicate them even to her husband; on Lady Catherine, therefore, as the only personage besides, with whom Helen appeared to be on terms of easy intimacy, her suspicion now centred; and she pursued her scrutiny on all around and concerning her with the quick, stealthy perseverance of a cat watching a mouse-hole; eager to pounce on the slightest hint or clue likely to unravel the mystery. Mrs. Campbell's fervent resolve to elucidate the matter was not one atom abated, when Helen, wearied of having her wits so constantly on the *qui vive*, and willing by any device to divert her mother's attention, took the opportunity, during a *tête-à-tête*

promenade in the garden, to relate to her a great part of what had passed between Sir Gerard and herself, and all Lady Emily Baynton's kindness. Mrs. Campbell listened with the most complacent attention; she felt that her darling Helen had all but gained the eminence she coveted for her, and the idea of losing it for what appeared to her a piece of fine, absurd delicacy, was intolerable.

"Well, my dear, after what you have told me about Sir Gerard, no one in their senses could believe anything so preposterous and unlikely as Lord Alresford's accusation. Most people have their weak points, and fastidiousness is certainly one of his; so never mind, my dear: when things get to the worst they must mend! Depend upon it, Sir Gerard is not so green as to swallow everything his noble friend chooses to thrust down his throat. You look terribly worn, though, my dear Helen; I fear you have been keeping late hours since your absence: perhaps sitting up in your own room. As Mildred has found another companion for her vigils, I suppose Lady Catherine Neville used to take compassion upon you. This is the way young ladies get intimate, is it not, my dear?" asked Mrs. Campbell, dexterously turning the conversation again on Lady Catherine.

"We used sometimes to hold a *conversazione* in my room, mamma, though not often."

"Is Lady Catherine likely to get married, do you know, Helen? It is the oddest thing in the world, that, living so much abroad, her fine fortune escaped the clutches of some foreign adventurer. Do you think she has formed any secret attachment?" asked Mrs. Campbell indifferently; though she paused on the threshold of the door, ere she entered the house, to listen to her daughter's reply.

"She did not make any such confession to me, mamma," answered Helen, calmly.

"Where did you say Colonel Sutherland is now, Helen?" asked Mrs. Campbell, once more pausing in the hall.

"I understood at his own house, somewhere in the neighbourhood of London."

"Oh!" replied Mrs. Campbell.

Helen's unexpected return home spread in a few hours over the village, and necessarily caused much comment and gossip. Mrs. Campbell, since her daughter's departure, had assumed a kind of oppressed, injured tone and manner, and professed total ignorance when it would please Helen to return: a period of time she supposed so very distant as to be beyond her powers of calculation; while it was reported Lady Elvas-ton had observed to one of her friends that, sorry as she should be to lose Helen Campbell from Greysdon, yet, as her society conferred so much pleasure on Lady Alresford, she

trusted that her visit to Amesbury would extend over many months. Various, therefore, were the surmises hazarded; while Helen, to her mother's inexpressible indignation, had to run the gauntlet of all the village scandal and ill-natured gossip. In the fabrication of the latter, Miss Jenks's talents stood unrivalled. She was the standard vinegar-cruet, where-at all the village newsmongers and busybodies came to imbibe the acid which gave a zest to the platitudes of their clique. Accordingly, her explanation, or rather suppositions, of the cause of Helen's banishment from Amesbury, were retailed from house to house in Greysdon: varied by comments offensive or defensive, as the parties were favourably or otherwise inclined towards the Campbells. "People who turn up their noses at their equals, like Helen Campbell, and who aspire to associate with lords and ladies, must be content to be sent back rolling until they find their own level again, at every passing whim and caprice of those they toady," was Miss Jenks's favourite valedictory remark, to all whom she met on her morning prowls for the two following days after Helen's return. Her jealous, acrimonious disposition, unchecked by the presence of Helen's friends the Elvastons, indulged itself in its fullest malignity, and there seemed nothing too bad or improbable enough for Miss Jenks to *insinuate*: as it is the practice of these malicious workers to wait until others less wary embody their evil suggestions in words, and then, in an amplified form, they retail them again far and wide, as *on dits* accidentally wafted to their ears; thus, often craftily securing impunity for themselves at other people's expense.

On returning home from some errand in the village, the evening following Helen's arrival at Greysdon, Mrs. Campbell met Miss Jenks; and, as usual, stopped to interchange greetings with her. This ceremony was no sooner over than Miss Jenks, in a smooth, insinuating tone—for there was a kind of downright pugnacity in Mrs. Campbell's attitude, which often seriously discomfited her—began:

"Well, Mrs. Campbell, and so Miss Helen is returned, I hear. I have been so overdone with business to-day, or I should have dropped in to congratulate you all; for I suppose it can only be her engagement to Sir Gerard Baynton which brings her back so unexpectedly?"

"What can have put such an absurdity into your head, Miss Jenks? Helen is not engaged; nor will she be, as yet, I trust: her society is too precious for us to desire any such thing," replied Mrs. Campbell, promptly.

"Indeed! though, to be sure, I quite agree with you. It will be some time ere Henrietta can replace Helen; who is so very superior to any girl I ever met with. Yet fancy, my

dear friend, people were malicious enough to say, that you were wild to bring about a match between your daughter and that empty-headed, satirical baronet. No great match, after all, for Helen Campbell, was my invariable comment."

"I am sorry that either you or anybody else should busy themselves about my affairs, Miss Jenks," was Mrs. Campbell's sturdy reply.

"Unhappily, my dear Mrs. Campbell, one cannot sew one's neighbours' mouths up; and people will talk as long as they have tongues. I hope Miss Helen left her noble friends well?"

"Perfectly well, I believe."

Miss Jenks seemed rather posed. However, as Mrs. Campbell walked on, she leisurely followed.

"What account does Miss Campbell bring of Colonel Sutherland? What a shocking affair that duel was, to be sure! Were I Lady Alresford, I should never forgive myself. I do not wonder, after her misconduct, that the earl is suspicious, and looks with displeasure on any person or thing which can recall past reminiscences," said Miss Jenks, darting a sharp glance at her companion's face, to see how she bore the insinuation.

"I never heard that Lord Alresford was suspicious, Miss Jenks; but you are probably better informed than we are. I shall carry this home, as a piece of news for Helen."

"Well, I am glad my favourite Helen has got rid of that ill-tempered baronet: who was always my especial aversion. I must confess, however, from what I witnessed at the Dorn-ton ball, I thought he most probably would offer. This is a sad mercenary age, Mrs. Campbell; and girls with no other dower than that of the Maid of Lodi in the old song, have a poor chance nowadays. I suppose Helen, who is so unlike everybody else, returns primed with conquest from Amesbury; though, like all the world, *she* also finds its lord the least amiable or enviable part of her friend's new possessions."

"I do not understand you, Miss Jenks," replied Mrs. Campbell, quickening her pace.

"I understand that Lord Alresford has the most overbearing, violent temper; and people say—mind, *I* do not, Mrs. Campbell—that one of the reasons of your daughter's sudden return was a frightful quarrel with her friend's husband. Excuse me, but I think it but a neighbourly part to give you, should you desire it, an opportunity of publishing a formal contradiction," added Miss Jenks quickly, with a bland smile.

"Perhaps you will be good enough to take that office upon yourself, Miss Jenks, and oblige me by giving, as you express it, a formal contradiction to so ~~very~~ absurd a report. Helen

and Lord Alresford parted on exceedingly courteous terms," replied Mrs. Campbell, in unmoved tones.

"Really! Well, I am glad to hear it. 'Tis a most difficult thing to detect truth from slander. Give my love to Helen. I hope all the grandees she associates with at Amesbury will not teach her to look down on her humble old friends at Greysdon," said Miss Jenks, with an affected simper.

"I hope not. Good-evening, Miss Jenks," said Mrs. Campbell, making a very decided pause before her own door.

"Good-day, Mrs. Campbell. By-the-bye, give Helen a hint to warn her friend to keep a sharp look-out after Made-moiselle Aglaë. Mrs. Slater several times caught the earl in earnest conversation with her; and to my mind she is prettier than her mistress. A stitch in time saves nine, Mrs. Campbell; and Miss Effingham that was may feel very much indebted to her mother's housekeeper for this piece of information. Farewell!" and Miss Jenks walked away with her peculiar jerking carriage, swinging the flounces of her gown half round her figure at every step.

CHAPTER XXXII

LADY CATHERINE DETERMINES TO EXCULPATE HELEN.

THE remainder of the day on which Lady Catherine quitted Amesbury, and the succeeding one, passed unmarked by any incident at Wardour. No one called; and scarce a sound echoed through the narrow, lofty corridors of her ancient mansion. Wardour Court, with its fine old woods and smiling landscape, failed now to excite the smallest enthusiasm in Lady Catherine's bosom. The profound calm appeared to oppress her: out of doors, too, there reigned that stillness in the elements peculiar to the warm, damp atmosphere of early autumn; when the tall grass and flowers wave mournfully in the light wind, every now and then blowing in short, sudden gusts, threading insidiously amid the foliage, and tossing in the air showers of beautiful variegated leaves.

Nothing so effectually crushes the energies and deadens the faculties, as extreme lingering suspense; for those who have no present hope cannot live, and act only for the future: cannot enfold all their sensations, thoughts and interests, as it were, in a chrysalis, and lead a passive existence until a more sunshiny hereafter arouses them to renewed activity. So it was with Lady Catherine. Since her return home, she had

almost ceased to struggle with the sorrow and apprehension which oppressed her : and pensive and sad, she sat by the window in her favourite room on the terrace, gazing listlessly on the fading woods, and declining beauty of the flower-garden. Her unfinished picture stood near her on its easel ; but though she had quitted the breakfast-room some hour and a half, it still remained untouched and disregarded. In Mrs. Otway's presence, indeed, rather than be subjected to her sympathy and admonition, Lady Catherine forced herself to put some restraint on her feelings ; but a sickening dread had taken possession of her mind, and bereft her almost of power to feign. The deep noiseless solitude of her home, instead of allaying, seemed to increase this restless irritation of mind. She panted for action ; for words of sympathy and consolation, from one who could enter into the agonising doubt which at times almost annihilated her reasoning powers under its terrible pressure. She thought of Helen Campbell ; of her gentle voice and kindly sympathy ; and an irrepressible desire to be better acquainted with one so sensitive and conciliating stole over her. Then, again, the progress of her reverie led her back to the dark thoughts perpetually haunting her mind. The clasp still remained unclaimed, entire, in her possession. What was now the mystery which shrouded Mr. Randolph ? and what did those dark red stains on the table of the hermitage portend, the remembrance of which made her shudder with horror and disgust ? With her fair face buried in her hands, Lady Catherine gave herself up to the spell of bitter musing ; and hot tears dropped one by one from between her quivering fingers on the window-seat. Suddenly she drew the brooch from her bosom, and earnestly and curiously examined the initial letters. A scarlet flush all at once mounted to her brow and cheeks ; hurriedly she dashed the drops from her eyes, and again renewed her examination. Thus she remained for some moments ; her breath coming quick and fast ; then she hastily arose, and with rapid steps paced the room. While she was thus occupied, Mrs. Otway entered. Lady Catherine's cheek still glowed with the rich colour which past emotion kindled.

She paused and averted her head ; then crossing the room hastily took up again her palette and brushes.

Mrs. Otway advanced and stood beside her.

"Well, Catherine, you have made wonderful progress in your picture this morning ; you must have worked hard since I saw you, my dear."

A smile curled Lady Catherine's lip.

"Besides, you are looking so much better too," continued Mrs. Otway. "Why, my dear, you were white as a sheet at breakfast ; now you have colour in your cheeks, and your dear

eyes have got rid of that wearied expression. You feel better this morning, Catherine, my love, do you not ? ”

Lady Catherine shook her head, and approached the window, against which Mrs. Otway had drawn her chair.

“Is it not very strange, Catherine, that we have heard nothing of Frederick Randolph during these past months ? ” said Mrs. Otway at last, after a long pause ; introducing Mr. Randolph’s name first, contrary to her usual custom.

“I have both seen and heard of him very lately,” replied Lady Catherine in low accents.

“Indeed ! I declare he comes and vanishes like the ghosts in Shakspeare’s play of Richard the Third. Where is he now, Catherine ? ”

“In England ; but whether permanently settled here or not, is beyond my power to tell.”

“Then Mr. Randolph still retains his heartless mystery ? Break with him now by all means, my dear Catherine. Depend upon it, he is unworthy. This suspense is killing you by inches ! ” exclaimed Mrs. Otway emphatically, almost angrily.

“Yes ; a few weeks, or, perhaps, days, shall terminate the mystery,” replied Lady Catherine, in low, resolute tones. “But for an untoward event, this knowledge would already have been mine.”

Mrs. Otway heaved a profound sigh. She fixed her eyes searchingly on her companion.

“The other night, at Amesbury, Catherine, were you not to have met Mr. Randolph ? ” asked she, hesitatingly.

“Yes,” replied Lady Catherine, drily, resuming her palette ; “but for some inexplicable reason, he did not keep his appointment, or else”—and she shuddered. “I suppose you heard from Wilmot enough to lead you to this supposition.”

“Wilmot said, my dear, that she strongly suspected your illness arose from exposure to the night air. Of course, I inquired her reason for such a strange assertion, and from her reply I gathered sufficient certainty that Mr. Randolph had contrived to communicate with you. And you have as yet received no explanation why he did not keep his appointment ? ”

“None,” replied the Lady Catherine, with glowing cheek, but in that decisive tone which indicated that she did not wish the subject pursued.

Mrs. Otway grumbled a little, fidgeted, and walked several times up and down the room before finally settling herself to work.

“Charles Turville has been to the lodge every morning since we left Amesbury, to inquire after you, Catherine. Poor fellow ! he cannot get over his banishment from your presence.”

"He will get over it in time, never fear. Maude Conway will eventually console him, I trust. By-the-bye, the letters will be here in half an hour. I shall surely hear from her to-day. Poor Maude! she and Charles Turville might make such a very happy pair!"

"Yes, if they both can forget the past," rejoined Mrs. Otway, gravely.

"Did you ever see Lord Normanton, Mrs. Otway, after he left Harrow?" asked Lady Catherine suddenly, after a very long pause, during which her brushes had again been laid aside for a restless wander up and down the room.

"I have not seen him for ten—let me see, no—fifteen years. Sir Gerard Baynton told me he distinguished himself greatly at college. Lord Normanton must be now seven or eight and twenty years old. How time flies, to be sure! It seems but yesterday since you were all children playing together on the lawn yonder."

"Maude appears to idolise her brother," said Lady Catherine, pursuing the thread of her own meditations. "It was odd that we never met abroad."

"I have often thought so, Catherine. It is certain Lord Normanton could not have visited Venice while we were resident there; for there never arrived an Englishman of any distinction who did not appear at Lord Alresford's soirées, or your own, as long as your dear father's health permitted. But for this unfortunate wound, my dear, Normanton, I doubt not, would have been over here to renew his friendship with you. I shall not be surprised if this foolish quarrel makes him a cripple for life."

"I wish you would not indulge in such dreadful presentiments, Mrs. Otway. Did not Sir Gerard tell us, that Lord Normanton is now convalescent, and able to move from the sofa? I hope there will be a letter from Maude by this day's post," continued Lady Catherine, in tones slightly, though very slightly, irritable, while a frown contracted her brow.

"Well, my dear, I hope with all my heart my words may not prove true."

Lady Catherine threw herself into a chair near to the window.

"It is very strange that I have never even seen a portrait of Lord Normanton at Moreton," said she at length, musingly.

"Lady Normanton is too much occupied with her whims and ailments, to think of anybody else; but Maude, I doubt not, possesses a portrait of her brother. You should ask her, my dear; that is, presuming you desire to see what your old playfellow is like, before you meet."

Lady Catherine made no reply; and the two sat for some

time in silence, relieved only by the occasional click of Mrs. Otway's knitting pins. Lady Catherine's cheek was still flushed; every now and then its hue deepened, and a strange brilliancy played in and lighted her eyes as she momentarily raised them from the ground, and then suffered them to droop again.

She appeared agitated, struggling to repress the thrilling thought which threatened to break forth in words, despite her efforts; but though her lips oft moved almost convulsively, Mrs. Otway perceived it not. Tranquillised by her hasty glance at Lady Catherine's face, when she first entered the room, she sat complacently pursuing her wonted occupation; so absorbed in the difficult task of bringing all the crooked, disjointed parts of her beloved pupil's history to fit, and form an harmonious whole, that she actually started, when, after a very long interval, she heard herself addressed again.

"Should you like to go and reside in Italy again, dear Mrs. Otway?" was the startling query which burst on the old lady's astonished ear.

"Italy! Bless me, my dear, I am very comfortable here! What should *I* do in Italy?" rejoined she quickly, fixing her spectacles so as to obtain a clear steady gaze into her companion's face.

"Because," continued Lady Catherine, in tones unmoved, "I cannot longer endure this life of perpetual suspense; neither will I live at Wardour burdened by a secret, which, even in the society of those I love and trust most, requires constant, painful vigilance over myself not to divulge. Therefore a month hence, unless my lot is materially altered, I am fully determined to leave England."

"Catherine, you surely cannot seriously contemplate such a project!" exclaimed Mrs. Otway, aghast. "How can we possibly be more comfortably or delightfully settled than here? Mr. Randolph is also in England. My dear, what can you be thinking about?"

"Another interview with Frederick Randolph will best interpret my thoughts."

"You have so much to interest you in this neighbourhood just now, Catherine. There is Sir Gerard Baynton over head and ears in love with Miss Campbell; and that beautiful Lady Alresford, who is evidently playing at cross questions and crooked answers with her noble-looking husband. You have taken upon yourself to make a marriage between Maude Conway and poor Charles. How is this to proceed if you go to Venice, my dear, I should like to know? Then, again, you have to renew your acquaintance with young Lord Norman-ton. Suppose, Catherine, we order the carriage after lunch,

and drive to Moreton. I think we have behaved very shabbily in not showing more interest in Lady Normanton's maladies."

"As you like," replied Lady Catherine, opening the window, and strolling out on the terrace.

"That old copy-book truism, 'mystery is odious,' certainly is one of the wisest of saws. I hate travesties and silly secrets, which, in nine cases out of ten, turn out much ado about nothing," grumbled Mrs. Otway, wrathfully. "I dare vouch, Frederick Randolph is one of the Carbonari, or something of that kind,—a proscribed man. But, good gracious! who have we here at this early hour?" exclaimed she, suddenly stopping, as the hall door-bell pealed. "I wish it might be either Lord Alresford or Charles Turville, to put the nonsense that dear child has just been talking out of her head. She never seems to listen to anyone else——"

The door opened, and Lady Alresford entered. She came forwards hastily, and with the kindest of smiles shook the old lady cordially by the hand. Mrs. Otway fancied when it vanished, that her face wore a saddened expression.

"I hope Lord Alresford is well?" asked she, for the contrary to her demand was the only evil Mrs. Otway imagined could possibly assail Mildred.

"Quite, I thank you;" and Lady Alresford moved towards the table, whereon, during their salutations, Hudson laid the letters just arrived by post.

"We were in hopes of seeing Lord Alresford here to-day. I wanted to have a little conversation with him about Lady Catherine. She is not well, and has just now strolled out on the terrace. If your ladyship will excuse me a moment, I will call her."

"No; pray do not, Mrs. Otway. To tell you the truth, I came hither so early this morning hoping to have a private conference with her; so, if you will allow me, I will take these letters and join her on the terrace," said Lady Alresford, quickly; for amongst the handwritings of Lady Catherine's correspondents, Mildred detected a character infinitely dear to her.

"Can *she* have found out anything about Mr. Randolph, I wonder? That man is like the Caliph Haroun Al Raschid in the *Arabian Nights*, I protest, and has a finger in everybody's pie. But what a sweet, obliging creature Lady Alresford is! I wonder the earl does not worship her; but perfect happiness is not of this world," ejaculated Mrs. Otway, as she stood at the window, and watched Mildred's light step down the terrace.

At its extreme end was an ornamented wire enclosure, for gold and silver pheasants. Against this Lady Catherine

stood, watching the graceful movements of her favourites. She turned her head at the sound of Mildred's step and with a smile of welcome advanced to meet her.

"You see, Catherine, I have not only paid you an early visit, but have actually taken upon myself the office of delivering your letters also. I found them on the table, and, with Mrs. Otway's permission, have brought them to you, as I hope to lure you to a walk round the garden," said Mildred laughingly, tendering the packet of letters after they had exchanged greetings.

Lady Catherine's eye glanced eagerly over the letters. She selected one from the number.

"This one is from Maude Conway. Mildred, I am sure you will excuse my anxiety about her," exclaimed she, hastily tearing open the envelope. "As for the remainder of the letters, since I do not recognise the hand of any of my correspondents, I suppose they are not of much import, and will serve to while away a solitary hour."

"Is Lord Normanton no better?" asked Mildred anxiously, as an expression of sorrow and anxiety flitted across Lady Catherine's brow as she read.

"Maude writes, that her brother has had a slight relapse, and she fears that the shock to his constitution is greater than was at first imagined. He suffers dreadfully from depression of spirits. Colonel Sutherland is pronounced out of danger."

Mildred made no reply, but the earnest prayer arose on her lips that, even now, the memory of the past might be healed, and the future yet abound with numerous blessings.

"What is the matter, Mildred? You appear *triste*, as if something vexatious had happened since we met," said Lady Catherine, after a long pause, turning her eyes inquiringly on the face of her companion, as they walked side by side. "I hope Lord Alresford is well?"

"Yes; but recently he has had a great deal of annoyance,"—and Mildred paused, uncertain what next to say.

"I am very grieved to hear it. I thought, during my recent visit to you, that at times he appeared extremely depressed," said Lady Catherine slowly; "so much so, Mildred—may I go on? May I speak now, dear Mildred, without fear of giving you offence?"

"Go on; say what you will, Catherine," replied Lady Alresford, struggling to quell the emotion these few words produced.

"Well, then, Mildred, sometimes in my heart I accused you of coldness and affected indifference. Forgive me, if I wronged you, when, perhaps, I arrogantly imagined that I detected the exquisite pain your deportment occasionally in-

flicted on Lord Alresford's proud, sensitive heart. Are you angry, Mildred?"

"No, Catherine; because I acknowledge that Lord Alresford has had great, just cause of complaint," replied Mildred firmly, though her lip trembled. "To this bitter retrospect, however, the last two days have added increased sorrow. Helen Campbell——"

"Helen Campbell!" and Lady Catherine turned her large, full eyes anxiously on Mildred's face. "What of Helen Campbell? Where is she?"

"Gone."

"Gone where?"

"Home; on account of a serious misunderstanding between Lord Alresford and herself. She quitted Amesbury yesterday morning, early," said Mildred, keenly watching the effect of her communication on her companion.

"What misunderstanding? Speak, I beseech you, Mildred," exclaimed Lady Catherine, vehemently.

"The last evening we spent together at Amesbury, Lord Alresford, instead of retiring after the party broke up, went out to walk; when he met an individual closely muffled in a large cloak, wandering in the shrubberies, who apparently did not see him, but whom he followed for some distance across the park, until he saw him leave it by the gate near the Avington turnpike. The earl, when he returned to the house, retired again to the library, the windows of which, you may not know, command the balcony of Helen's room; and presently he saw her descend the steps leading into the garden, and in like manner return to her room again, after an absence of an hour or more. These two circumstances combined, you may conceive, Catherine, to fix an injurious suspicion against poor Helen; and what is more, one of the gardeners, the following morning, picked up, on the cedar walk, a large brooch that Lord Alresford had given to her but a few days previously." Mildred paused, and turned away her head; for her lips trembled with agitation: and yet she felt that she was only performing her duty by Helen.

Lady Catherine was silent, and when Mildred ventured to raise her eyes to her face, it was pale as the whitest marble.

"Tell me all. When Helen was accused, did she not assert—prove her innocence?" demanded she at length, slowly.

"No. She firmly refused the slightest explanation or reply, to the inquiry Lord Alresford thought it his duty to make. Helen's resolution was inflexible on this point; and as the earl would not, or could not, after what he had witnessed, express his belief in her integrity, she preferred leaving Amesbury altogether. In spite, however, of her strange refusal to make any statement, I cannot, Catherine, believe Helen guilty of

the duplicity towards Sir Gerard, of which Lord Alresford is so convinced and indignant; and if, after all, her innocence can be made manifest by the simple explanation she so perversely refuses, think what it must cost her! for I believe her to be truly and sincerely attached to Sir Gerard; and this affair, I fear, as it remains, must lead to their inevitable separation."

Lady Catherine leant against the low wall of the terrace. Her lips moved, but no words were audible therefrom. Mildred for a few minutes stood silently by her side, shocked at the emotion her statement had produced; but yet the more confirmed in her belief of Helen's innocence, and in her resolution not to allow her to be sacrificed.

"The whole affair appears to me, Catherine, so strange and improbable—so unlike anything that could spring from any circumstance in Helen's uneventful life—that I determined to seek your advice and counsel; hoping, as you were her latest companion on that unfortunate evening, you might probably prove a greater friend than she is willing to be to herself; and perhaps afford me some clue to this very inexplicable mystery."

Lady Catherine withdrew her hands from her face, and riveted a keen glance on Lady Alresford.

"You suspect me, Mildred?" exclaimed she, at length, resolutely.

Lady Alresford made no reply.

"How do you know that I was the last person in Helen's society?"

"Forgive me, dear Catherine, if, in my keen anxiety to clear my friend, I resorted to an *espionage* otherwise unpardonable. Wilnot told my maid that you had dismissed her without requiring her services on that evening, as you intended to spend some time longer with Miss Campbell in her room than you wished to keep her up. This I elicited from Aglaë."

Again Lady Catherine's agitation became uncontrollable. Mildred silently grasped her hand: it was cold and nerveless.

"Lady Alresford," at length said she, speaking in tones subdued, though firm, "you are right. I can clear your friend. Helen, with her noble truth and forbearance, shall not be sacrificed; neither shall Sir Gerard Baynton, when too late, have reason to deplore the hour when my destiny casts its shadow over his. Yes, to-day Helen shall be completely exonerated, even at a cost the bitterness of which none can comprehend. I will see Lord Alresford at once;" and she turned away, to hide the tears which now flowed down her cheeks.

Mildred's heart throbbed at the sight of the grief apparent

on Lady Catherine's beautiful face. She knew what that unutterable anguish is which darkens and fills the soul with insupportable terrors. Tender and gentle are the words and sympathy of those who themselves have been tried by affliction; with pitying commiseration, therefore, Mildred looked on Lady Catherine's poignant sorrow; and twining her arm round her friend's waist, said, gently,—

"Catherine, dearest, may I not know this secret? Is there nothing I can do?"

"Nothing, Mildred; only I thank you for this opportunity of doing Helen justice. The sooner the ordeal is over, the better. I will go immediately to Amesbury: but not with you, for I need composure and strength for the revelation I have to make," said she, hurriedly. "Why did not Helen at once appeal to me, Mildred? I would instantly have vindicated her."

"She has now done so, doubtless. I recognised her handwriting in the address of one of the letters the post brought you just now, Catherine. Helen could not, I am sure, distrust for an instant your generosity," said Mildred, gently and soothingly.

In a second the letters were again in Lady Catherine's hand, and soon swift tears fell as she perused Helen's forcible though simple appeal. There was also another letter from Mrs. Campbell, who, apologising for the liberty, acknowledged that, by dint of persevering inquiry, she had at length surprised her daughter into the admission that her ladyship was the last person with whom she had conversed on that memorable evening; and, therefore, she presumed to request Lady Catherine would correct any false impression on Lord Alresford's mind, by testifying that Helen remained in her room up to the hour when her ladyship took leave for the night.

"Poor Helen! how she must have suffered. I despair of ever being able sufficiently to express my gratitude for her generous unselfishness. Oh, Mildred! to think that, stranger as I am to them, I have plunged her family into this deep affliction. Tell me—does Sir Gerard Baynton know of Helen's apparent disgrace?" asked Lady Catherine, eagerly.

"I left Sir Gerard with Lord Alresford when I set out hither," replied Mildred, unwilling to add one needless pang to what her friend already suffered.

"Did you not see him also, Mildred? Had you not one extenuating word for Helen?"

"Yes, Catherine. I besought Sir Gerard to have patience, and I bade him hope. Lord Alresford conceived it to be his duty to explain fully the reasons of Helen's absence; but, dear Catherine, he added no comment of his own."

Lady Catherine paused. The shade on her brow darkened.

"Your words appear to indicate, Mildred, that your husband's censure would be severe," said she, at length, moodily.

"You know Lord Alresford's strict standard, dear Catherine; and Helen appears guilty of so treacherous a deed, that I fear his indignation is strongly kindled: though, most considerably, he has forborne to speak of it in my presence."

"Is Sir Gerard's faith shaken, Mildred? Does he love Helen too well to believe aught, but on the fullest, most positive testimony?" asked Lady Catherine, as she turned towards the house.

"Sir Gerard would have set off for Greysdon instantly, but at my request, my urgent entreaty, he consented to delay his journey until to-night, or to-morrow at latest. He cannot, you know, disbelieve the earl's positive statement; but he flatters himself that Helen will yield to his entreaty, his love, and explain to him alone her mysterious rencontre. But, Catherine, how ill you appear!" exclaimed Lady Alresford in alarm, observing that the pallor on Lady Catherine's cheek looked, if possible, more settled and ashy, and that scarce a tinge of colour shone in her lips.

"It is nothing: a little water will speedily revive me. Now, dear Mildred, farewell. I must spend the next half hour alone. Tell Lord Alresford I wish to speak to him privately on important business, an hour or so hence: but, as you love me, hint not to him its purport. Mildred, Helen Campbell is worthy of your friendship. She shall esteem me also; and when she knows all, she will see I can emulate her noble courage."

"She never doubted it, believe me, dear Catherine. Shall I see you at Amesbury?"

"No, Mildred; my interview to-day must only be with Lord Alresford," replied Lady Catherine, as she hurriedly entered the sitting-room.

Lady Alresford stood silently on the terrace for a few minutes, and then, not feeling disposed for another colloquy with Mrs. Otway, walked to the front of the mansion, where her carriage was waiting, and drove immediately homewards.

Glad and fervent were Mildred's feelings at having accomplished Helen's rescue. Lady Catherine, then, after all, was the heroine of the midnight ramble; and for whom, but for someone who possessed her love, could she have risked so much? Mildred felt abashed, ashamed of her former suspicions; yet at the same time, a thrill of rapturous joy shot through her heart. Could it be that her husband had never loved other than herself? That, amidst her caprice, vacillation, and coldness, his heart had remained constant to her, and daily mourned her alienation? She thought of the many

solitary hours she had suffered him to spend alone, under the impression of her dislike and unkindness, and contrasted her own conduct with his unremitting desire to afford her every gratification—his forbearance, and indulgence of all her whims and caprices. Tears sprang to her eyes as she mused on the past—that past, so often fraught to all with keen, agonising reminiscences of actions done, of words spoken beyond the power of recall. But the future—might it not have some compensation in store for both? She felt that the perfect confidence and devotion which the earl demanded, and, from which she shrank while shadowed by her doubts during the early days of her marriage, would now be her highest bliss. But unasked, how could she assume that privilege so long rejected? Lord Alresford, neither during their courtship nor since their union, had spoken to her of love; but yet a voice whispered that she was infinitely dear to him. Would he have told her so?—would he have asked her love on that evening after their return from the Chauntry, when she broke away from him so abruptly? Immersed in this train of thought, Mildred looked round with surprise when the carriage stopped at the door of her home. Her first impulse on alighting was to seek her husband, and deliver Lady Catherine's message. Accordingly, she proceeded to the library. Lord Alresford was writing intently, and did not turn his head when the door opened. Mildred advanced, and lightly laid her hand on his shoulder. He looked up and smiled.

"You have been taking an early drive or walk this morning, Mildred."

"I have been to Wardour. Lady Catherine has an affair of importance to consult you upon, and will be here in about half an hour. I came to tell you, that you might not be absent; but now my errand is accomplished, I think I had better say farewell, for you appear overwhelmed with business this morning," said she, glancing, half laughingly, at the table, which was covered with papers.

"No, Mildred, you do not interrupt me. What does Lady Catherine wish to consult me about?"

"She begged me not to give you the slightest hint. Though, indeed, I know so little of her proposed confidence that the prohibition was almost unnecessary," rejoined Mildred, hastily. "Can I not be of any use to you, Lord Alresford, in the arrangement or despatch of these letters? It would make me so very happy."

This was the first time that Mildred had sought to identify herself in his occupations. The earl looked up, surprised at her softened manner and tone. Her hand lightly rested on his shoulder, as she still stood by the table.

"May I put seals on that heap of letters?" asked she, hastily throwing aside her bonnet.

"Certainly, if it will afford you any amusement," replied Lord Alresford laughing, and drawing a chair to the table. "My long interview this morning with poor Baynton has thrown me back; all these letters ought to have been ready for the post."

Mildred glanced at her husband; she thought he looked pale and harassed. All present sympathy for the friend whom she had so effectually served vanished; she thought only of him. Had she done kindly and well in letting him deal thus sternly, though justly, according to the aspect in which he alone could view Helen's case, without one word of sympathy from her lips—and she his wife?

"Lord Alresford," at length began she, while tears rose in her eyes, "do not think me insensible to the anxiety you must have suffered about this affair of Helen Campbell's. I have never spoken to you on the subject, because I did not know whether it might not be displeasing to you; but you have performed a painful duty in a way my heart thanks you for."

"At length, then, Mildred, you render me justice, even at the expense of your friend?"

"Had I known as little of Helen Campbell's character as you do, I should have acted precisely in a similar manner."

Lord Alresford made no reply, but continued writing. Mildred, when she had finished her self-imposed task, watched his progress. Her beautiful lips were slightly parted, and her hair, disordered by her bonnet, drooped in masses of ringlets over her cheek, to which agitation had imparted an unwonted bloom. Presently the earl laid down his pen. Their eyes met; she smiled one of her brightest, sunniest smiles.

Lord Alresford glanced from her beautiful face to the closely-written sheet before him. Some unusual emotion seemed to agitate him. He turned again towards her, and met the same sweet, earnest gaze.

"Mildred," said he at length, in a voice which slightly faltered from its usual tone of manly decision, "I cannot do this thing that I have firmly resolved, unknown to you. Read," and he took the letter from the writing-case before him, and laid it down beside her.

In a moment Lady Alresford understood all; he was going to leave her! She did not reply. In her efforts to realise, to wrestle with, the terrible fear, the blood seemed to recede from her heart, and for a moment she sat with features pale and rigid, her eyes bent steadily to the ground.

"Mildred!"

His voice roused her.

"It is come at last. You are going—going to leave me," murmured she in faltering accents, and her head sank on her folded hands.

At this moment a servant announced the Lady Catherine Neville.

Lady Alresford started, and then hastily quitted the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE CREST ON THE JEWEL.

LADY CATHERINE immediately entered. Her veil was drawn before her face. She paused, and glanced round the room, as Lady Alresford quickly passed, and then walked slowly forwards to meet the earl.

"I am sorry you have had the trouble of coming hither. Why did you not summon me to Wardour?" said Lord Alresford kindly, taking her hand, and leading her to a chair.

"Mildred has not given you, then, the slightest intimation of the purport of my visit?" asked Lady Catherine, in a low unsteady voice, flinging back her veil.

Lord Alresford looked earnestly at her.

"Catherine, what has happened? Something! it must be calamitous indeed, to make you look and speak thus. You came to seek my advice; tell me, then, the plain facts of the case, and command my services to the uttermost," exclaimed the earl, rising and approaching Lady Catherine again.

Not a shade of colour gave life to her beautiful face, and a mist shadowed the eyes which a little time ago sparkled in their own sunny light. For a moment Lady Catherine covered her face with her hands.

The earl gazed at her in surprise.

"You alarm me seriously. What can you possibly have to consult me upon capable of producing this agitation? Compose yourself, Catherine. We have known each other too well, and too long, to feel embarrassment in saying anything we deem necessary to communicate; and you are the very last person in the world I should dream of having a scene with."

"Nor shall you be disappointed. Are we quite secure against interruption?" said Lady Catherine, glancing round the room.

"Quite sure: but, if you please, I will desire myself to be denied to everyone," said the earl, laying his hand on the bell.

Lady Catherine hastily arrested his arm.

"No, do not summon anyone here. Do not ring, I beseech you."

"As you will. Now, Catherine, let me at once be informed of this affair which causes you so much uneasiness," rejoined Lord Alresford, very kindly, taking a seat near her.

"You have all along had the highest opinion of my truth and integrity, and believed me sincere in the unlimited confidence I expressed in your friendship, Lord Alresford: what will you say if you find that I have been deceiving you, and while making this profession have kept back something which would greatly—wholly have changed our positions?"

"You must assume an utterly improbable circumstance, Catherine. Three months after Lord Willingham's decease you became of age, and consequently, from thenceforth, your own mistress in all things. What could it have availed you, therefore, to deceive me during this short period?"

Lady Catherine shook her head mournfully, and a slight shudder passed over her.

"You little imagined, Lord Alresford, that the result of your late most kind welcome to me here would overwhelm you with perplexity; and not you alone, but also assail the fame and happiness of one of your guests," resumed she, with as much firmness as she could command, though her voice at last sank into an almost inaudible whisper.

"You speak in enigmas, Lady Catherine. I am quite at a loss to divine to what you possibly can allude. I know of no perplexity resulting from your visit: on the contrary, it has afforded us many pleasant reminiscences," rejoined Lord Alresford, fixing a sharp, scrutinising gaze on her face.

"I have heard for the first time, this morning, from Lady Alresford, the suspicion under which Helen Campbell labours, and which led to her leaving your house." Lady Catherine paused; large drops stood on her brow. "How shall I say it? Can you not guess, Lord Alresford? Helen Campbell did not do that of which she is accused. She is perfectly innocent," exclaimed Lady Catherine, starting from her chair, and pacing up and down the room.

Lord Alresford looked amazed.

"And if it were not Miss Campbell whom I beheld return from the garden, who then was it?" asked he at length, slowly and calmly, after a long silence.

Lady Catherine paused; then slowly advancing, she stood before the earl, and withdrawing her hands from her face, said steadily and distinctly,—

"It was I, Lord Alresford—I!"

"You, Lady Catherine! You! who can receive visits when and from whom you will at Wardour—impossible that you can have descended to anything so disgraceful as a clandestine

meeting at midnight in my grounds!" exclaimed Lord Alresford, in indignant amazement.

A vivid flush spread over Lady Catherine's face and neck, and then receded again. Still she stood before the earl, as if rooted to the spot.

"I took Helen Campbell's most sacred word to keep my secret. Nobly has she performed her promise, Lord Alresford; and thus I exonerate her from every particle of blame. She knew not my errand: she knows it not now. All she has learned is from your own lips. The communication which rendered my subsequent act requisite, reached me when we were together in her room. I will add that, if argument or entreaty could have availed to divert me from my design, Helen's would have done so. She pleaded eloquently, and showed as strong an abhorrence of what I meditated as you could do, my lord. Without thinking of the suspicion I might entail upon her, clad in her cloak and bonnet, I left her room by the balcony, and regained it the same way. Helen courageously sacrificed herself to hide my disgrace. Her only participation, my lord, in the affair is, that she has suffered with me."

"An hour ago, Catherine, I should have deemed it utterly impossible such an avowal could proceed from your lips; nor can I express the feelings of indignant surprise and grief with which I now hear it. Fear not, I will do ample justice to Miss Campbell," said the earl, with emotion. "But, Catherine," continued he, earnestly, "surely, this bare exculpation of Miss Campbell is not all I am to learn of this grievous affair! Think with what sorrow and consternation your father would have heard such a confession from your lips. In the name of our ancient friendship, Catherine, do not give me the pain of seeing you persist in a degrading intrigue, which no circumstance can justify. You stand almost alone in the world; and your father, by intrusting to me the sole management of your concerns, seemed to indicate his desire that, as far as possible, I should replace his loss, and act in all things as your brother. I implore you, then, disappoint not his wishes——"

"Lord Alresford; you shall hear all—all. Yet what will you say when my folly becomes fully revealed?" exclaimed Lady Catherine, mournfully.

"I was not aware that you had formed any engagement,—any attachment, abroad, Catherine. In short, who was this person you condescended to meet?"

She struggled for composure, and for a brief space excitement kindled again the beautiful hues of health on her face. Large tears clung to her dark eyelashes as they drooped on her cheek: and she half turned aside her head.

"Did you ever meet Mr. Randolph, Lord Alresford?" said she, in a voice scarce raised above a whisper, so tremulous were its tones.

"Yes. Mr. Randolph, then, was the person for whom you made this sacrifice?"

Lady Catherine silently bent her head.

"In the first place; who is Mr. Randolph? and if he has been so fortunate as to obtain your affection, why does he not come forward and ask your hand?—if, indeed, he has the slightest pretension to do so," demanded Lord Alresford, with clouded brow.

Again the blood rushed to Lady Catherine's cheek.

"My father loved Frederick Randolph, Lord Alresford; and, but a few weeks before his death, gave his assent to our union, on certain conditions. For some reason, unknown to me at the present moment, Mr. Randolph chose to conceal his position and circumstances in life. When we quitted Italy, after the lapse of some months he was to visit us at Wardour, where he promised everything should be explained; but——"

She paused. Her utterance, which had been rapid and nervous, seemed all at once to fail her.

"Your father's death intervened, Catherine. But since then, has Mr. Randolph proved himself worthy of the prize to which he dared aspire, by faithfully adhering to his promise?"

"He has as yet told me nothing; but that he will do so, fully, honourably, I have not the smallest doubt. Did you know Mr. Randolph, neither would you harbour suspicion of his faith, my lord."

A disdainful smile curled the earl's lip.

"Nearly a year has elapsed since Lord Willingham's death, and you talk to me of confidence in a man, who, aware of your isolated position, can keep you in this state of suspense! Nay, and by his evil influence dares subject you, Lady Catherine, to imputations alike dishonourable to your character and station! You hesitate to discard this man; who, under the powerful promptings of love, and doubtless of ambition also, yet dares not avow himself! Remember who you are, Lady Catherine. Remember that in you centre the honours of Willingham; and will you venture to bestow them upon an individual who appears not even to have an honest name to boast of?"

Lady Catherine's eyes were riveted on the earl when he ceased speaking; her lips were firmly, tightly compressed.

"I have no longer the power to follow your advice," murmured she.

"Catherine, can you acknowledge such weakness? Can you avow such mental bondage? This man so much beneath you as to be compelled to resort to travesty to obtain admittance

into the same society as yourself—this Mr. Randolph—refer him to me.”

“Lord Alresford, you know not all yet. You refuse to concede to Mr. Randolph one ennobling virtue. I know him to be true, faithful, honourable! I dare tell you that now, which will not only prove how deeply rooted is my trust; but that I have also dared act upon this conviction,” exclaimed Lady Catherine; and in a low, rapid tone, she commenced with minute accuracy the relation of every incident which had occurred at Narbonne.

With averted head and cheek of varying hues, Lady Catherine proceeded; but notwithstanding her trepidation, there was a resolute emphasis in her voice, a kind of determined continuancy in her narrative, which riveted the earl’s attention. Despite her efforts, a few rebellious tears occasionally gathered in her eyes, but indignantly she dashed them away, and when all was told, she stood pale and resolute. Lord Alresford was pacing to and fro: at times pausing to listen more attentively; but not once did he interrupt her narrative. For many minutes after its conclusion, he remained silent. The stillness, at length, became intolerable to her excited feelings.

“Lord Alresford, speak to me. Reproach me. Anything better than this silence. Are you not shocked,—astonished?” exclaimed Lady Catherine, in a voice of passionate emotion: and she advanced and touched his arm.

“Well may you thus be overpowered, Lady Catherine, at the recital you have volunteered,” said the earl, as he gazed on her pale cheek and quivering lip. “You, Catherine—you who were, after one other, my ideal of all that is perfect in woman, have you been thus betrayed by passion to disregard your honour, to disgrace your noble name, to be persuaded by the artful devices of a designing villain to deceive your friends, and all who have your interest at heart? Not content with thus erring, you have, moreover, accepted during the past eight months the degrading position of this person’s unacknowledged wife! Catherine, can you hear from my lips this statement of what you have done, without shrinking from yourself in horror and remorse?”

Lady Catherine started to her feet; her eyes flashed.

“No, Lord Alresford, no! I have only done what my heart and conscience approve; save in the single instance of concealing this one thing from you, who, by my father’s will and my own consent, are entitled to my confidence. ’Tis the consciousness of thus having erred, which alone brings me before you overwhelmed with confusion. My love and faith are Frederick Randolph’s. Till he chooses to explain all that appears mysterious in his conduct, I am content to wait; firmly

convinced all will finally be well. Lord Alresford, my father sanctioned Mr. Randolph's suit ; my love has given already that faith which eventually he had the right to claim ; therefore not even from your lips, my lord, will I listen to words such as those you have just uttered."

"And you suppose, Catherine, I shall be as regardless of my duty to you as you have been reckless towards yourself?" asked the earl, calmly and resolutely.

Her breath came quick and fast, and her lips trembled with passionate excitement.

"You can do no more than myself, my lord. My duty is to await Mr. Randolph's pleasure," replied she, proudly.

"And mine, Catherine, is to save you : to save you from the dreadful consequences of your rashness ; to save you from the artful snares of a man who, by involving your youth and inexperience in the terrors of a clandestine intrigue, has shown himself alike unprincipled and unworthy. With feelings of the deepest and most heartfelt thankfulness, learn, Lady Catherine, that your so-called marriage at Narbonne is illegal. You were not of age until three or four months after it was contracted, therefore, without my formal consent as your guardian, you could not bestow your hand. This very day —ay, this very hour, I will institute the necessary proceedings for its dissolution," exclaimed Lord Alresford, moving towards the table upon which his writing materials stood.

For a moment she seemed stunned.

"But I do not desire it. I will never, never consent," cried she, at length, vehemently. "Consider what you are about to do, Lord Alresford!"

"Certainly, Lady Catherine," replied the earl, calmly, dipping the pen into the ink and holding it suspended over the paper before him.

"I protest against this most arbitrary act : if, indeed, you possess the power you assert. It is my own will to be Frederick Randolph's wife, and I solemnly declare, never will I give myself to another. Do your worst, Lord Alresford ; it will only afford me opportunity again of testifying my love and confidence," exclaimed she, approaching him and speaking in a voice tremulous with emotion and excitement.

"After I have performed my duty, you must please yourself, Lady Catherine. If, after past experience and upon reflection, you deliberately place yourself again in this man's power, on your own head, then, will rest the responsibility and consequence of your deed," replied the earl, immovably.

She saw that violence and reproaches were lost upon him : she had to contend with a spirit strong and unbending as her own. Silently she stood by his side, watching the rapid strokes of his pen over the paper.

"Lord Alresford, what is it you are about to do?" asked Lady Catherine at length, in low, murmuring accents, placing her hand on his, so as to arrest the movements of the pen.

"This letter is to Sir James Nugent, the eminent barrister, requesting him to visit Amesbury without delay," replied Lord Alresford, calmly, disengaging his hand.

"Before you execute this terrible threat, will you not hear me? Will you not listen to my entreaty, Lord Alresford? Never did you before deny request of mine. Give me time. Mr. Randolph has solemnly pledged himself, in our next interview to reveal his history,—to acknowledge our marriage. His birth, something tells me, is equal to mine; but even should it not prove so, I will still be true to my vows. If, inexorable to my entreaty, you persist in this cruel exposure, which will avail nothing, I will not remain another day in England. Oh, that I had Mildred's lips to persuade you to grant me delay!"

Her words, delivered with passionate emotion, seemed to move Lord Alresford's resolution. He laid down his pen. A gleam of joy sparkled in her beautiful eyes.

"Delay! Upon what plea do you ask it, Catherine? Where now is Mr. Randolph?"

"Here, in England. He has been at Wardour twice within the last five months; and a few evenings ago, if I mistook not Mildred's words, you were nearly accosting him yourself," replied she, with a faint smile.

"You did not meet, then! Am I to understand it was for the purpose of avowing all that Mr. Randolph came?"

"For this sole purpose, I truly and firmly believe, my lord. The hermitage, near the cedar walk, was our place of rendezvous; but that fearful storm: do you remember it? Alone, exposed to its fury, I shall never forget the horrors of that night—for Mr. Randolph came not; but the table was wet with blood. Oh, my lord, how can I account for this?" asked Lady Catherine, shudderingly.

"Strange! Did Mr. Randolph ever previously allude to any dispute likely to lead to a hostile encounter?" asked Lord Alresford, thoughtfully, after an interval of a few seconds.

"He hinted at some painful mystery, which peremptorily forbade the immediate avowal of our marriage," replied she.

"And you have not since met?"

"No. Now, will you grant my petition? will you give me a few weeks' delay?"

"So far as this, Catherine, I will concede: if within the next fourteen days Mr. Randolph comes to me, tenders an honourable explanation of the mystery which envelopes him, and establishes his pretensions to aspire to your hand, I can have nothing further to say in the matter; excepting that I

recognise the ceremony which passed between you at Narbonne only in the light of a betrothment. If, on the contrary, I hear nothing from or of Mr. Randolph, I cannot suffer you to remain longer his dupe, with such fearful advantages on his side. I will give you back your liberty, and you must then use it as you please." The earl paused, and then presently added, "Catherine, have you nothing in your possession which might help us to elucidate this mystery? Nothing that can throw light on Mr. Randolph's position in life, or on what he is now employed?"

Slowly she drew the clasp from her bosom, and laid it before the earl. Never before had any eyes but her own gazed upon it, since the evening Mr. Randolph hung it round her neck.

"This is all I have. See, it divides. It was the token by which Mr. Randolph claimed my solemn promise to meet him where he should indicate, on reception of one half of it. That I received under your lordship's roof a few evenings ago."

Lord Alresford attentively examined the clasp.

"Here are Mr. Randolph's initials plain enough; but what does this C. on the centre medallion signify, Catherine? Can he have another surname? In what name did he marry you?" asked the earl, still minutely examining the clasp. "Surely, you know this, Catherine. What signature did Mr. Randolph append to your marriage certificate?" added the earl quickly, as she replied not.

"I cannot tell. The whole appeared to me a dream."

"Do you know, then, the name of the clergyman who performed the ceremony, Lady Catherine?" demanded Lord Alresford, impatiently.

"A Mr. Clare, a clergyman of the Church of England, and Mr. Randolph's travelling companion and friend."

Lord Alresford did not speak again for some minutes.

Lady Catherine, with folded arms, sat before him watching the expression of his countenance, and she thought it relaxed a little from its look of stern decision. He still held the jewel in his hand.

"The only clergyman of the name of Clare, whom I ever heard of, is a gentleman who formerly held the small living of Newcombe, in this neighbourhood. He relinquished it, some years ago, to accept the appointment of tutor to Lord Norman-ton," observed the earl, at length, deliberately.

Lady Catherine started violently, and the blood suffused her face and neck.

"Did you never ask Mr. Randolph to explain the meaning of this letter C.?"

"Never. Until lately, I always concluded it was the initial of my own name——"

She paused suddenly.

"And, lately, what have you concluded the letter signifies, Catherine?" asked Lord Alresford, promptly, fixing a searching look on her face.

"Nothing, my lord," resumed Lady Catherine, hastily. "In the bewilderment of my mind, improbable visions have risen, to vanish almost as soon as formed——"

"Have you remarked this before?" asked the earl, suddenly interrupting her.

And he pointed to a small crest—a lion rampant holding a drawn sword in its mouth; so very minutely and delicately engraved on the reverse of the jewel, that when the clasp parted their appeared but a faint, shapeless scratch on either division.

"Yes, I observed it this morning; but I know no one who bears a similar crest."

Again there was a long silence.

"Tell me truly, Catherine, are your suspicions excited more towards one person than another? And have you any reason for supposing Mr. Randolph to be of higher rank than he acknowledges?" said Lord Alresford, emphatically.

She hesitated.

"A wild conjecture to-day flitted across my mind, Lord Alresford; but it is too improbable, too devoid of possibility, for me to hazard such an idea."

"Nevertheless, let me hear it, Catherine."

"I cannot," hastily responded she. "Nay, I view it as a kind of presumption, to dare hope that my error could be rewarded by the prosperous result my dream adjudged."

"I see, Catherine, our suspicions both centre at the same point—Witham. I will not now discuss my reasons; suffice it—I shall go thither immediately."

In a moment Lady Catherine became pale as alabaster.

"It is impossible! If it should not be so, my lord?" faltered she.

"Then the visit I owe my neighbour, Lord Normanton, will be paid; that is all. Catherine, compose yourself. As you say, I see very little probability that my mission will prove a successful one; nevertheless, my duty requires that nothing should be omitted likely to unravel the mystery. I have not much hope, inasmuch that such reckless imprudence as yours has been, is seldom rewarded by so happy an issue. You will entrust this to me?" continued Lord Alresford, taking the clasp from the table.

"Do not now, I entreat, Lord Alresford, urge this affair. I have given Mr. Randolph my sacred word that our secret shall remain undivulged. Grant me still the delay of a few days," exclaimed Lady Catherine imploringly.

"Not a day, Catherine. Recall your firmness—your courage.

You have placed this affair in my hands, and I will pursue it. Let me now lead you to your carriage: or will you remain with Lady Alresford, until I return?"

"No; let me go home," replied she faintly.

"You will see me this evening, then, at Wardour; and dear Catherine, as this is the first hot contention we have had, so may it also be the last between us."

"If this mission to Witham fails, will you have patience? will you deal more leniently than you threaten, my lord?" asked Lady Catherine, pausing at the door, and raising her eyes, with a supplicatory expression, to his.

"No, Lady Catherine. I will not recede one iota from the purpose you have just now heard me declare."

Lady Catherine hurriedly withdrew her hand, which the earl had taken. She fancied a shade of reproach flitted across his brow. She instantly replaced her hand in his.

"No, we will not part thus, Lord Alresford. I know you to be the kindest, truest, best friend I have. Forgive me any harsh word which, in my distress, may have passed my lips. What you are about to do I know is right; but there are remedies which sicken the heart to dwell upon. Such a one is mine. Can you pardon me?" and Lady Catherine raised her noble head, and riveted her clear, truthful eyes upon him.

"I knew, in a calmer moment, your justice would render me such a tribute, Catherine. I thank you," replied Lord Alresford, with emotion.

"Do not either let one imprudence lower me for ever in your esteem, or quench the friendship of years, Lord Alresford," rejoined she, anxiously.

"On one condition only, Catherine; that you are imprudent no more, and will place yourself under my guidance throughout this affair," replied the earl in a lighter tone, as he led her to her carriage.

"I shall expect you at Wardour this evening, without fail; whether your tidings be good or bad," said Lady Catherine, with rising colour, as she took her seat.

"Without fail. I dare not bid you hope, Catherine."

She smiled sadly, and shook her head.

"And Helen Campbell?"

"Miss Campbell shall hear from me of her complete exculpation to-night. I know this, at any rate, will afford you consolation, Catherine. Farewell."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

EXIT MR. RANDOLPH.

As soon as Lady Catherine had taken her departure, Lord Alresford gave orders for his carriage to be brought round immediately. He then returned to the library, and wrote a few lines to Mildred. As he sealed the note, the clock struck one, and ten minutes afterwards the earl was on his road to Witham; which he reached after a rapid drive of two hours. Miss Conway and her brother were out walking; but Lord Alresford was informed that they were not likely to have strolled far from the house, as for several days past Lord Normanton had not been well enough to venture out of doors.

The room into which the earl was ushered evidently was that where the brother and sister had spent the morning together. A bright fire blazed in the grate, and the faint autumnal afternoon sun poured its beams through the window, near which stood Miss Conway's work-table. At some little distance from the fire was a couch, arranged as for an invalid, with piles of cushions; books were scattered around in every direction, and on a small stand near the sofa lay an open portfolio of sketches. The draught of air between the open window and the door, as the earl entered, wafted several of these drawings from the stand to the floor. This attracted Lord Alresford's attention, and after a time he approached the portfolio, and leisurely turned over its contents; consisting chiefly of sketches of Italian scenery, drawn with masterly skill and effect, and which recalled to the earl's memory many an old familiar landscape. Next came spirited groups of Sicilian and Neapolitan *contadini* in their picturesque costumes; and then the sketcher appeared to have aimed at a higher style of art, and endeavoured to portray the noble features and forms of Italian beauty. One lovely face and figure, which seemed strangely familiar to Lord Alresford, was delineated repeatedly, in every diversity of attitude and fanciful variety of costume: sometimes under the turbaned magnificence of a Turkish Sultana; now in the classic attire of a Greek peasant girl; then in the simple garb of an English maiden: in short, the artist appeared to have been fairly bewitched with the charms of the beautiful original. Lord Alresford still held in his hand the most carefully finished of these portraits when Miss Conway returned from her walk. She entered the room alone, and,

though slightly surprised at seeing the earl, gave him the most cordial welcome.

"Normanton will be here in a few minutes. I think you do not know my brother, Lord Alresford?"

"By comparing notes, I believe we may find it possible that we met at Palermo a year ago," replied the earl. "Are these masterly sketches your brother's, Miss Conway?"

"Yes; are they not beautiful? But do you not see an extraordinary likeness to Catherine in this Greek peasant girl, whom Normanton has amused himself in drawing in every variety of attitude and costume? Catherine really might have sat to him for her portrait."

"It is so very good a likeness that I thought, and still think, it can only be intended for Lady Catherine," replied the earl.

Maude looked puzzled.

"But Normanton and Catherine have never met lately; and it is quite impossible he can have sketched this portrait from childish recollections."

"Quite so. But, Miss Conway, are you positive they have never met? If I am right in conjecturing that I once saw Lord Normanton at Palermo, Catherine must have done so likewise, as she was then visiting her aunt, Madame de Pezarro," rejoined the earl, with a smile. "Do you know under what circumstances your brother drew this very striking likeness of Lady Catherine?"

Maude gazed very earnestly in the earl's face. Lord Alresford repeated his question.

"I remember asking Normanton who the original of this portrait was, and I think he replied that she was a lady he met with somewhere in France. She must have been very captivating to have attracted him so greatly. But what an odd idea it is of yours, Lord Alresford, to think Normanton saw Catherine, his old play-fellow, without making himself known; or that she could have heard his name mentioned in her presence without recalling a multitude of reminiscences, which must have led to much friendly intercourse. Indeed, Catherine told me a few weeks ago, that she never met my brother," rejoined Maude, smiling at the warmth with which she found herself refuting the earl's doubts.

"If it be as I suspect, neither Lady Catherine nor myself knew your brother as Lord Normanton, Miss Conway."

Maude raised her clear eyes with a most bewildered expression.

"What can you mean, Lord Alresford? Why should my brother resort to disguise of any kind, especially towards Catherine and yourself? Pray, let me look again at the sketch."

Lord Alresford still held the portrait in his hand. Miss Conway came and stood by him at the window.

"What do these mean, Miss Conway?" asked Lord Alresford, pointing to a few hastily scratched, half-effaced letters in one corner of the drawing.

Maude again raised her eyes: involuntarily a merry smile played round her lips.

"I rather suspect Normanton intends those pencil strokes for the initial letters of his Christian and surname—Frederick Randolph Conway. But what extraordinary idea have you got into your head, Lord Alresford?" replied she, as demurely as she could. "I really wish Normanton would come and answer for himself."

"I have yet to ask after your brother's health, Miss Conway?" said the earl, highly amused at Maude's puzzled looks.

"Oh, he is much better again to-day. About three or four days ago, he had a most serious relapse. The wound opened again, and caused him for some time intense suffering. Normanton's chief ailment now, is nervous depression of spirits," replied Maude, gravely.

"Can you account at all, Miss Conway, for your brother's relapse?" asked Lord Alresford.

"Not at all. The evening before, dear Normanton seemed more than usually well, and even talked of paying Sir Gerard Baynton an early visit. You may imagine my dismay and distress when, early the following morning, my maid roused me with the painful intelligence. Restlessness and thirst for action, I suppose, invariably accompany convalescence, after an illness such as Normanton's; else I should say there is something very peculiar in his fitful longings for change."

"Do you think the fair original of this portrait has anything to do with your brother's desire for renewed energy and health?" asked the earl, smiling.

Maude looked astonished at the question.

"Normanton does not contemplate going abroad again at present, I believe," replied she, seriously.

"Indeed! As an instance, Miss Conway, of the varied impulses by which different people are swayed, Catherine only this morning actually threatened to break up her establishment, and depart forthwith to the continent."

"Catherine!" and Miss Conway stuck her needle in the delicate piece of embroidery in her hand, laid it down on the work-table, and gazed at her companion in the utmost amazement.

"Yes. You, Miss Conway, her most intimate friend, must often have remarked with pain the settled melancholy which weighs on Lady Catherine's spirits: latterly, all her vivacity appears subdued. Have you never observed this?"

"Often, Lord Alresford; but I always ascribed it to—to,—"

and she paused.

"To what, Miss Conway?"

"To sorrow and responsibilities prematurely fallen upon her, Lord Alresford; which, acting on a mind more than usually sensitive, have produced such a degree of nervous depression as time alone can heal."

"There is something more than this. Lady Catherine has too strong a mind, and too keen a sense of her duties, to indulge in vague reveries of past afflictions."

"Poor Catherine! But what has happened, Lord Alresford, since I have been from home? Surely her intention of quitting England is not seriously taken?" asked Maude, with undisguised anxiety.

"She will not leave home, if I have any influence over her, Miss Conway. But I believe her decision will greatly depend on the result of my visit here to-day."

"Lord Alresford, what can you mean? Have you any message from dear Catherine for me? Pray, tell me really if your visit here has any especial object, as your manner would imply," said Miss Conway, earnestly.

"I shall from henceforth attribute some mysterious influence to the sunny clime of Italy, as both Catherine and your brother return home suffering from extraordinary depression of spirits," replied the earl, evading her query. "Did Lord Normanton travel with any friend in Italy, Miss Conway?"

"His old tutor, Mr. Clare, was, I believe, his companion the greater part of the period he spent abroad. I cannot imagine what can have aroused this suspicion of yours, Lord Alresford: yet 'tis very like one of dear Normanton's vagaries to amuse himself with concealing his true name and rank, to test what kind of reception people would give him without them!" exclaimed Maude, musingly.

"Lord Normanton will be happy to see your lordship in the library," said a servant at the moment entering the room.

As soon as the door closed again, Maude cast a sharp, quick glance on the earl. Her colour came and flitted away quickly.

"Lord Alresford, it is vain to conceal it—you are here on some extraordinary errand. Your whole conversation with me has been an enigma," said she, rapidly. "Satisfy, I beseech you, my anxiety on one point before you go: what name do you suppose my brother took abroad?"

"That of Randolph. But from Lord Normanton I trust to hear much more of this gentleman ——"

"Could it be possible that ——" Maude paused, the colour rushed to her cheek.

Lord Alresford smiled, and left the room.

For some minutes Miss Conway stood motionless where the earl left her. In utter bewilderment, her mind resolved first

one and then another of the strange doubts raised by her conversation with him, and compared them with what she had herself observed in Lady Catherine's conduct. The whole, when united by her active imagination, afforded proof so evident of her secret hope, that involuntarily conviction flashed home. She clasped her hands, and wept and laughed by turns, in the very fulness of her heart's joy. What she had so ardently desired was now unexpectedly accomplished; and, forgetful of her own grief, Maude's imagination for a while revelled in picturing the future happiness of her loved brother and her friend. That Lord Normanton and Lady Catherine had met before, and that under his assumed name her brother had succeeded in gaining her friend's affection, and, perhaps, the promise of her hand, Maude felt not the smallest doubt; yet that some mystery clouded this easy solution was no less evident. What did the earl's visit portend? and why, on Lord Normanton's arrival in England, had he not at once claimed Lady Catherine's hand? Tears of affection and sorrow then poured down Maude's cheeks when she thought on all her brother had lately risked for her sake; of the present happiness he had disregarded, to espouse and avenge her cause; and she shuddered at the amount of misery Colonel Sutherland's betrayal might have entailed.

After wandering restlessly, for some time, up and down the room, Maude at length sank into a chair, and sat, with the impatience of a child, eagerly watching the hands of the clock. Then she arose, and opening the door, listened for a second or two on the stairs. All, however, was tranquil; the earl and her brother were still closeted. Another brief space, and the library door opened. Maude's heart palpitated as she listened to the echo of a swift footstep on the staircase. She arose, Lord Normanton entered, and soon she threw herself into her brother's arms; for a glance told her his errand was a joyful one.

"Why, Maude, you silly child, why do you weep?" said Lord Normanton, kissing her cheek.

"For joy. Is it, then, true that you and Catherine have met, and that you love? Dear, dear Normanton, what happiness!"

"Maude, Catherine is mine! I have won her without rank, title—without one apparent allurements! She is mine,—faithfully mine!" exclaimed he, exultingly.

"But I do not understand. Are you actually affianced? Tell me all quickly, dear Normanton," rejoined Maude, raising her head.

"Affianced! Maude, what will you say when you learn that Catherine is already my wife?"

"Impossible! Normanton, you can but jest," replied Miss

Conway, rapidly : yet there was something in her brother's earnest tone and manner which made her heart palpitate with expectation and surprise.

"Maude, Catherine loved me so well, that for my sake she renounced all. Judging me by the truthful integrity of her own pure spirit, she believed my word when I told her that no degradation lurked under my refusal to reveal my position in life ; therefore, yielding to my passionate entreaty, before she quitted France she became my wife. Would that I had worlds to lay at her feet in return for her noble devotion!"

"I do not yet comprehend. Tell me, in the first place, dear Normanton, why you travelled under an assumed name, and what induced you to conceal yourself from Catherine?"

"You remember that lamentable affair of Robert Conway's, Maude?"

"Perfectly. But what has that to do with your strange roaming in disguise on the continent?" asked Maude, thoughtfully.

"Much : but hearken, Maude, for I may now reveal the only secret I have ever withhelden from you, my darling sister ; and that only because it was not mine to confide."

Lord Normanton then recounted facts relative to her cousin's unprincipled career, which filled Maude with sorrow and indignation. It appeared that Mr. Conway had been in the habit of forging Lord Normanton's signature to cheques on his bankers for small sums, which for some time met with prompt payment ; as for long no suspicion of nefarious dealing was excited. Emboldened by continued impunity, Mr. Conway at length ventured on the desperate measure of drawing on his cousin's credit to the amount of a thousand pounds, to liquidate his gambling debts. Startled at the sum, or perhaps detecting some trifling irregularity in the signature, the cheque was detained, and the principals of the bank wrote immediately to Lord Normanton, stating its date, and the cause of their suspicion, and asking for fuller confirmation. Unfortunately for Mr. Conway, it was at once disavowed by Lord Normanton ; who, notwithstanding his cousin's former delinquencies, still retained too high an opinion of his honour and probity to suspect him of so heinous a crime. The consequence, however, of this unequivocal denial on Lord Normanton's part was, that at once a warrant was procured for Mr. Conway's arrest for forgery ; and, incensed beyond measure at the audacity as well as the amount, of the attempted fraud, added to the sums already embezzled, the bank flatly refused to hush up the affair : though Lord Normanton, grieved and concerned beyond expression, hastened up to town immediately on being made acquainted with the painful truth, in the hope of staying proceedings. Unluckily,

his letter dishonouring the draft remained in the bankers' hands, and this they firmly refused to relinquish; and no intercession availed to induce them to compromise the affair, or to alter their resolution respecting it.

Proceedings were instantly commenced, and Mr. Conway's conviction seemed inevitable; one chance, and but one chance, remained to save him from the consequences of his unprincipled deed. Lord Normanton's presence and evidence in court were indispensable to swear to the forgery; and failing this, it was hinted to him that probably the case could not satisfactorily be proved against the prisoner. Without the loss of an hour, therefore, after a last and unsuccessful interview with the prosecutors, Lord Normanton determined at any cost to save his unhappy relative, and knowing that measures would be forthwith adopted to compel his attendance before the magistrates on the following morning, went on board a packet just about to sail for Ostend, and at once proceeded on a long-projected tour through Italy. In order to prevent any annoyance or useless efforts to enforce his return, Lord Normanton dropped his title, and assumed, instead, the surname of Randolph. Meanwhile, the letter in the bankers' hands, though it indirectly proved Mr. Conway's guilt, was not in itself considered sufficient evidence to convict him, and as the most important point—the proving of the forged signatures—was rendered impossible by Lord Normanton's deliberate and unexpected step, and the clever mode in which he foiled all inquiries or pursuit, the prosecution failed; therefore, after a wearisome series of remands extending over many months, Mr. Conway at last obtained his liberty. As long as he remained in custody, Lord Normanton had generously pledged his solemn word to continue abroad, on condition that he quitted England immediately after his discharge, and thus placed himself beyond the reach of further molestation. Nothing could be more agreeable to Mr. Conway, as may be supposed, on regaining his liberty, than the very literal performance of his promise; but just as he was in the act of stepping on board the packet to convey him to that haven of the discarded, Boulogne-sur-Mer, he found himself once more rudely seized by the shoulder, and most unceremoniously consigned again to prison for debt. Another appeal to his generous cousin afforded Mr. Conway the means at length of happily reaching Paris; and Lord Normanton, as soon as he received the welcome tidings, immediately returned home: urged, as we know, by the most potent of all motives.

During the period of his exile, Lord Normanton most scrupulously adhered to the duty he had imposed on himself, in order to rescue his worthless kinsman from the penalties of his crime. His family remained in perfect ignorance of his

incognito, and never knew the exact place in which he was sojourning; all their letters to him being directed under cover to Mr. Clare, to the care of a banker in Naples, by whom they were forwarded to their destination. Once abroad, the desire to meet and find himself again in the society of the Lady Catherine Neville, became Lord Normanton's predominant impulse. He followed her to Palermo, and soon all the sway her ardent imaginative temperament formerly exercised over him, was renewed with tenfold force, heightened by the spell wrought by her extreme beauty. The necessity of his disguise, before so irksome, now became absolutely welcome to Lord Normanton: it permitted and fostered that latent sentiment of distrust of the purity of the motives of others, to which we before alluded as his most besetting sin. To win his old playfellow, the beautiful and idolised Lady Catherine—to carry her off from amidst the titled suitors who knelt for her smile, by the force of the passionate attachment with which he hoped to inspire her, became from thenceforth the pivot upon which all Lord Normanton's thoughts and actions turned.

The fervent homage of the handsome young Englishman soon attracted Lady Catherine's attention: perhaps, too, his voice and language touched thrillingly on a string which linked her still with the sympathies of olden days; for how prosperously Lord Normanton succeeded in his suit, beyond his most sanguine hopes, these pages have already unfolded to the reader.

Rapidly, then, Lord Normanton continued his narrative, and related to his wondering sister every incident of his connection with Lord Willingham and his daughter; dwelling with proud elation on Lady Catherine's implicit trust, and on to the crowning proof of her love at Narbonne. Maude listened with breathless attention: her very being seemed absorbed in the words falling from her brother's lips; and, with alternate smiles and tears, she sat his eager audittress.

"Oh, Normanton! and, after all this, you risked your own life and Catherine's happiness for me. What shall I say or do for you, who perilled so much for me? Dear Normanton, I shudder at the sorrow I might have occasioned!" exclaimed she, in a voice faltering with emotion.

"Say not this, dear Maude, for your injuries are mine. Should I have been worthy of Catherine's love, if I could have seen you, my darling sister, scorned and insulted by an unworthy profligate, and not espouse your quarrel? But if you love me, never revert again to this painful passage in our lives. Fortune, to-day, seems to gild the future with most glowing beams; and even you, my own Maude, may yet find the clue to true happiness, instead of being mocked by its shadow:

which would perpetually have haunted you as Colonel Sutherland's wife."

Maude forced herself to smile, unwilling to quench the sanguine joy which filled her brother's heart.

"Well, Normanton, yours is a most romantic history; but still, I think that Catherine has great reason to complain. Oh, had you seen her misery while labouring under this suspense! Why did you not fly to Wardour on your arrival in England?"

"I am ashamed to confess, Maude, that after all Catherine's sacrifices, a doubt of her truth and faith assailed me. All your letters—my mother's, and even your own, Maude—hinted at the favour with which Mr. Turville was greeted at Wardour. The suspicion rankled with bitter pain that perhaps even her noble spirit bowed before the world's idols—money and distinction; and that she repented her love had been vowed to an obscure unknown. I arrived in England, apparently, only to witness the accomplishment of my direst suspicion. I beheld—but never mind what that sight was which filled me, at the time, with despair; suffice it, Maude, when at length disabused, I found myself inextricably involved in another affair——"

"You mean with Colonel Sutherland's challenge. Normanton, Catherine was nearer at hand than you dreamt of. She saw you depart from Moreton. She also witnessed our grief; little imagining that, had she entered the room ten minutes earlier, anguish unutterable would likewise have been hers."

"I saw her that same evening, Maude. All my resolution to spare her the knowledge of what was impending, nearly succumbed under her eloquent pleadings to share my destiny, whatever it might be. Oh, Maude, a life of the most devoted homage could feebly repay the debt I owe her!"

"And what, after you had so cruelly sealed her lips, drew from Catherine the avowal of her marriage, Normanton?"

"Her keen sense of honour brought that admission to her guardian, which not even the sorest suspense could before extort. Catherine, you know, has lately been staying at Amesbury, and a friend of Lady Alresford's, a Miss Campbell, has fallen under suspicion of disloyal practices, in making assignations in the grounds at night——"

"But what could you, or Catherine, have possibly to do with this? Your assignations lately, dear Normanton, have not been of a very exciting description."

Lord Normanton smiled.

"Do you remember my sudden relapse a few days ago, Maude?"

"Surely, Normanton, you were not then imprudent enough to attempt to see Catherine?" exclaimed Miss Conway, in extreme surprise.

"Never offender pleaded guilty more unblushingly, Maude

than I do," replied Lord Normanton. "But, come, Lord Alresford awaits us below. It would be neither courteous nor grateful to leave him longer to his own cogitations. I shall ever feel indebted for his forbearance and kindness, under circumstances anything but pleasing for a guardian to learn."

"And Catherine—when do you fly to implore her pardon? Ah, Normanton! many a game have you played with her in days of yore; but none with so subtle and tortuous a plot."

"How can you ask such a question, Maude? I return with Lord Alresford to Wardour."

"And what then? Your marriage acknowledged, do you bring Catherine here at once?"

"She shall decide. Lord Alresford has made the most urgent representations, and insists that, though she is now in reality my wife, to the world's eye she shall at present appear only my betrothed. As Catherine desires, so shall it be."

"A surprising concession, truly, on your part, Normanton, after all your misdemeanours," replied Maude, laughing; and rising, she linked her arm within her brother's. "I suppose you will make Moreton your home now. Mamma will be frantic with joy."

"But, dear Maude, what will become of you if I leave Witham this afternoon?" said Lord Normanton, suddenly pausing.

"Tell Catherine, my dear sister, that to-morrow I shall appear at her doors a suppliant for hospitality," rejoined Maude, laughing, as she sprang down stairs; and in another minute, with her face glowing with smiles and animation, Miss Conway was receiving Lord Alresford's congratulations.

Meanwhile, at Wardour Court all was silence and gloom. Lady Catherine on her return from Amesbury did not weep; but she was pale, so very pale, that when she entered the sitting-room Mrs. Otway started up in alarm. Lady Catherine's first act was to throw aside her bonnet and shawl; the next, gently to draw the knitting from Mrs. Otway's hands, and bid her listen. Then, without preface, she calmly imparted the whole of her history. The old lady sat at first as if stunned under the communication. Her tongue appeared to cleave to the roof of her mouth, and when she tardily recovered its use, Lady Catherine was gone: nor did Mrs. Otway see more of her for many hours, though she vainly sought admittance at her chamber-door. Incapable, then, of controlling her mental disquietude, Mrs. Otway returned to the sitting-room, and throwing herself on the sofa, wept, fretted, and fumed, tied and untied her cap-strings, and finally nearly perpetrated an *auto-da-fé* of her favourite knitting. In this state she remained until the clock struck six, when a peal of the door-bell threw her into a fresh state of violent trepidation; and fluttering with

nervousness, she was on the point of flying from the room in search of Lady Catherine, when her steps were arrested by Hudson.

"Lord Alresford, Madam, begs to speak with you. His lordship awaits you in the drawing-room."

"With me, Hudson? Surely you are mistaken: the earl wishes to see your mistress," rejoined Mrs. Otway, anxiously.

"No, Madam; Lord Alresford walked into the drawing-room, and desired me to give this message to you," replied Hudson, decisively.

"Very well," replied Mrs. Otway. Then she continued muttering to herself,—*"I wonder what fresh catastrophe the earl has to announce, which he is afraid to pour into that poor child's ear! I suppose he has failed in his mission. I knew he would; the Conways have too much sense for such knight-errantry. But I will go and warn that darling child that Lord Alresford is here."*

As Mrs. Otway was proceeding to put her design in execution, she met Lady Catherine on the staircase.

"Good gracious, Catherine! you look like a corpse in its winding sheet," groaned the old lady, in despair. "Oh! my dear, that you should ever have subjected yourself to this——"

"Should Lord Alresford wish to see me, Mrs. Otway, I shall be in the little west parlour," interrupted Lady Catherine, hastily passing.

"Love is the bane of every girl's existence, I am persuaded! That Frederick Randolph must have a heart of flint! What can I say to Lord Alresford? My only trust is in him to get us through this dreadful affair," continued Mrs. Otway to herself, speaking in disjointed phrases; then pausing a moment at the door of the drawing-room, to settle her cap and smooth her point-lace apron, she entered. Mrs. Otway made a movement of surprise, when at the first glance she perceived that the earl was not alone. Lord Normanton stood at the window, with his back to the door; the moment she closed it, however, he turned full round and confronted her.

"Bless us and save us! Mr. Randolph, can it be you?" exclaimed Mrs. Otway, retreating.

"Yes, 'tis I, indeed, Mrs. Otway; always, it appears, destined to steal upon you when least expected. But have you no welcome for your old friend?" asked Lord Normanton, laughing, and extending his hand.

"I don't know, Mr. Randolph; but for the good company I see you in, I should say that I had no welcome to give to one who has so cruelly used and deceived the best and fairest creature that ever breathed," said Mrs. Otway, indignantly, refusing his proffered hand. "How you could have the heart to desert Catherine! to let tears be her portion, constant as her

daily bread, when she condescended to forget everything for you—*she* who might, and would, but for you, have matched with the highest in the land! I suppose, however, seeing you with Lord Alresford, you are come at length to render the Lady Catherine justice," and the old lady's cheeks flushed, for she was now roused up to the highest possible pitch of indignation.

"I am here, Mrs. Otway, to make every atonement in my power. I deserve your anger, and feel as sensibly alive to my own demerits as you can be. I hope, however, when you know all the facts of the case, you will be more lenient in your judgment; for I should be sorry, indeed, to forfeit your esteem."

"Well, Mr. Randolph, you always had a very particular way of your own in coming round people, and I must acknowledge, despite your past extraordinary conduct, I am heartily glad to see you. Are you satisfied, Lord Alresford, with the explanations Mr. Randolph has volunteered?"

"I am perfectly satisfied, Mrs. Otway," replied Lord Alresford, infinitely amused. "And now, what will you say, when you learn that this delinquent, whom you have so properly censured, is your old friend Normanton?"

For a few minutes the old lady seemed transfixed with astonishment; the next, she put on her spectacles, and advanced close to Lord Normanton.

"Are you, indeed, Frederick Conway? Let me look at you. Yes; like as two daisies to your late father. Ah, I see now why a lingering preference made me hope that Catherine would choose you: though, as a boy, you were always the plague of my life. How blind I must have been! Well, this is the happiest day of my life. I always knew that it would turn out so!" and good Mrs. Otway's tears dropped fast and thick on Lord Normanton's hand, which she held tightly grasped in her own.

"Dear Mrs. Otway, I see that you have not quite thrown away all affection for me. I may yet obtain your forgiveness," said Lord Normanton, kissing her hand.

"What a joyful day for Catherine!"

"Yes. Where is she, Mrs. Otway? Catherine—Lady Normanton?"

"In the small west room. But had I not better break it to her?"

"No, Mrs. Otway; I will myself tell her of my happiness. Lord Alresford, I shall see you at Amesbury to-morrow," said Lord Normanton, as he hastily quitted the room.

"Well, of all wonderful things, Lord Alresford, this is the most wonderful!" exclaimed Mrs. Otway, after a silence of a few minutes, wiping her eyes.

"Yes; it is, indeed, seldom an imprudent step like Catherine's has so fortunate a *dénouement*."

"Mr. Randolph,—I mean, Lord Normanton, has such uncommonly winning manners, that the poor child was lured into it. Why he tantalised her so by this suspense surpasses my imagination. I dare say I shall hear all about it to-night. We are deeply indebted to you, I am sure, Lord Alresford."

"Not in the least. Had Catherine before confided in me, much suffering would have been spared her: but concealment is one of the foibles of your sex. I must now bid you farewell, Mrs. Otway, for I have another visit to pay before I return home; and I dare say you will not be sorry either for a little retirement to compose your thoughts. Tell Catherine, I participate most heartily and truly in her happiness," said the earl, as he quitted the room; for Mrs. Otway was still too much overcome to be capable of any exertion, save that of wiping her eyes.

"I will not fail, you may be sure, Lord Alresford. I think I shall just put on my bonnet and take an hour's walk on the terrace," murmured Mrs. Otway to herself, perfectly oblivious that darkness was fast setting in.

Lord Alresford's next destination was to the Chantry; a mansion, fortunately, only two or three miles distant, and on his road home.

Dinner was over when the earl arrived, and Sir Gerard and his mother were together in the drawing-room. Lady Emily was sitting by the fire with her work-table and lamp, busily employed, while her son lounged negligently opposite to her on the sofa. He started up hurriedly when Lord Alresford was announced, while Lady Emily laid down her work, and looked up with eager interest.

"Alresford! What in the world brings you here at this hour?" exclaimed Sir Gerard, eagerly.

"To tell you news, Baynton, which, from certain peculiarities I detected in your manner this morning, I presume you will pronounce the happiest that could greet you," replied the earl. "Lady Emily, I rejoice to inform you that not the slightest stigma rests on Miss Campbell's character. She is completely exonerated; and her conduct, instead of censure, merits our highest admiration and applause. It has been noble, upright, and honourable."

"This is, indeed, most joyous news, Lord Alresford. Helen's character appeared so frank and clear, that it was indeed grievous to think her guilty of deceit; yet the evidence seemed unanswerable. If it was not Miss Campbell who quitted her room, who could it have been?" asked Lady Emily, speaking at first in tones of great delight as she glanced at her son; yet, ere she concluded, her voice subdued itself

into doubtful accents, so apprehensive was she of raising fallacious hope in his bosom.

"There never lurked the slightest doubt in my mind, my dear mother, that Miss Campbell's innocence would be perfectly vindicated; therefore, I am quite ready to rest contented with Alresford's assurance to that effect, without asking further explanations. I shall go to Greysdon to-morrow, and carry Helen the happy tidings myself," said Sir Gerard, hastily, anxious to spare his friend the pain of entering upon the subject; for a suspicion haunted him that Lady Alresford was in some way connected with the exploit for which her friend had suffered the penalty.

Lady Emily, however, was less sparing: her son's future happiness was at stake, and she firmly repeated the question.

"My dear Lord Alresford, may I not know the truth? Excuse a mother's anxiety. What was Miss Campbell's errand in the park at so late an hour?"

"She never left her room. It was Lady Catherine who availed herself of Miss Campbell's apartment, as affording a readier exit from the house, as well as of her bonnet and shawl——"

"Lady Catherine!" exclaimed both Sir Gerard and his mother, in the same breath.

"Lady Catherine came forward most nobly in Miss Campbell's vindication; and I am authorised to clear the latter from every suspicion, and to reveal so much of Lady Catherine's history as may be requisite for that purpose. It appears that she and Lord Normanton met abroad, while the latter travelled under an assumed name: they became mutually attached; and it was to meet Lord Normanton that Lady Catherine left my house the other night. For reasons which recent events easily explain, Lord Normanton still preserved his *incognito* after his return to England; and Lady Catherine knew not the real name and station of the man to whom she had promised her hand, until an hour ago. This morning she confided her history to me; when, in the course of conversation, on comparing notes together, I became convinced that Mr. Randolph might be found at Witham; and most deeply rejoiced I am to find my supposition realised."

"Lord Normanton engaged to Lady Catherine! Who ever dreamed of such a thing? It is, however, a most suitable match; and one cannot imagine Lord Normanton's object in carrying on his suit clandestinely," exclaimed Lady Emily, in astonishment.

"Then this explains Normanton's feverish ramblings during the early part of his illness. Often when I have been by his bedside the name of Catherine, and some unintelligible phrases in which the words Narbonne—wife—Mr. Clare—perpetually

recurred," said Sir Gerard. "Poor Lady Catherine! this, too, accounts for her frequent melancholy: and Normanton! I cannot sufficiently admire his fortitude in avenging his sister's injuries. I shall invite him to come and take up his abode here until after his marriage; for the old dowager at Moreton would worry him into a relapse again," continued Sir Gerard, lightly.

"And what is to be done about Helen Campbell, Lord Alresford?" asked Lady Emily, as soon as she recovered a little from her surprise.

"Catherine promised to send her tidings of her exculpation immediately. Lady Alresford will doubtless do the same; and I shall also write to Mr. Campbell, and request him to allow his daughter to return to Amesbury. Will you deliver my letter, Baynton, and second it with the whole strength of your eloquence? Mildred shall send her maid to escort Miss Campbell back the day after to-morrow."

"No, not the day after to-morrow, I hope; nor yet the next day, nor the day after that," replied Sir Gerard, laughing. "I am your ambassador; therefore leave me, if you please, my lord, to decide on the time and the season most opportune to restore Helen to her friend's society."

"Agreed," exclaimed the earl, rising, and taking leave of Lady Emily. "My letter to Mr. Campbell shall be with you by eight to-morrow morning. Farewell, dear Baynton, may your suit prosper! She is worthy of you," said Lord Alresford, as he wrung his friend's hand, and stepped into his carriage.

CHAPTER XXXV.

EXPLANATION AND FORGIVENESS.

MILDRED, meanwhile, on quitting the library, took refuge, as usual, in her own apartment. Hastily closing the door, she threw herself on a chair, and gave free indulgence to the bitterness that filled her heart. The terrible fear which Lord Alresford's silence confirmed (for she read not a syllable of the letter he put into her hands) hung the centre around which her thoughts gathered; and she sat crushed, bereft of energy to combat the despair that weighed upon her spirit. He was going to leave her! She remembered and shuddered at the firm inflexibility that distinguished the earl's character. Had she then trifled until all was lost? and was she from thenceforth abandoned to her own cheerless self-upbraidings? Yet, if so her husband had resolved, how could she frame words of reproach? Judging her by her actions, Lord Alresford was conscious of no wrong, no cruelty. With patience unexampled, he had borne her caprices, submitted to her slights; and now dare she even hope to bend his determination, or to imagine that his love for one so ungrateful was powerful enough to induce him at her prayer to forego it? Fearless she sat, and from time to time her cold trembling hands swept across her brow. In her abstraction, words half-formed ever and anon arose on her lip; yet, to look at her desponding face and listless attitude, few would have divined the maddening self-reproach that wrung her heart: so calm and passive in its outward demonstration is that hopeless despair which deadens the soul; and while dissipating, perhaps, an illusive future, leaves it to combat alone with its own present misery.

Mildred sat thus, her head bowed in silent outward apathy, during the interview between the earl and Lady Catherine. She started when she heard the carriage roll from the door, and hurriedly arose: perhaps, the earl might seek her if only to confirm his design. She listened: five—ten minutes elapsed. At length a light rap and lighter step ushered in Aglaë, who silently laid a letter before her mistress, and quitted the room. In a second the envelope yielded to Mildred's impetuous finger, and though she then read of the complete exculpation of her friend, and her husband's earnest request that she should write and recall her—read that Sir Gerard Baynton ere long would be rejoicing in the assurance of Helen's innocence, no thrill of joy moved her heart. Upon the concluding portion of the letter alone she dwelt with unspeakable delight. Slightly al-

luding to the agitation she had evinced when informed of his contemplated departure, the earl wrote,—“I do not see you, Mildred, before my visit to Witham, for I feel that the moment is at last arrived when subterfuge can avail you no longer. As your heart stands towards me, so must you let me read its language. At the moment of our separation, for an indefinite period, I see that you, even you, can no longer persist in the false and unnatural system you have hitherto chosen to adopt; and that, at length, all the inconsistencies I have observed in your conduct must resolve themselves into one open, deliberate profession of your sentiments and wishes; upon which I have decided our future relations shall be regulated.”

Tears rained from Mildred's eyes on the paper, for conscience loudly testified that she had not dealt uprightly. She mused on the numberless advances towards a better understanding, the kind forethought and attention to her slightest wish evinced ever by Lord Alresford, and weighed them with the return she had made: she thought of his forbearance under provocations intolerable to a man of his sensitive feeling, and sighed to see how greatly the balance was on his side.

Spiritless and dejected, she wandered from room to room during that long afternoon: and a memorable one it was in Mildred's life. Forced to the humiliating task of self-examination, her spirit descried its weakness; and, humbled and penitent, she resolved to cast from her that jealous susceptibility and repelling reserve which had been her bane. But the task was a more difficult one than she imagined: as the hour of the earl's return approached, more and more discomforted and restless did she become. At her usual hour she dressed, and descended to the drawing-room. Seven o'clock passed, and her husband came not; eight o'clock, and she still paced the room with that fevered impatience which converts minutes into hours. She threw herself on a couch, and vainly sought for that total abstraction from thought—that vague passionless reverie and prostration of the whole powers of mind—which often succeeds severe mental anguish. Presently Mildred heard Lord Alresford's voice in the hall: she sprang to her feet, and stood with changing colour, expecting his entrance. Again, for a few brief seconds, she listened to his voice; then the library door closed, and all was silent. She drew a long deep breath, and sank back again on the sofa. Mechanically she took up her work, then laid it aside again, and recommenced her restless wanderings. Her mind perpetually dwelt on the terrible fear that the earl was about to leave her: yet she still hoped that his purpose might not have been confirmed by active measures. Eagerly again Mildred listened for his approaching step, and in her torturing anxiety even accused the earl of cruelty in disregarding her suspense.

Vainly she tried to read: book after book she rejected in disgust. Listlessly she then took up a newspaper from the table before her, and glanced down its closely printed columns. Suddenly her eye fell on the following words:—

"We are enabled to announce on most positive authority, that the Earl of Alresford is about to leave England for the continent, on a special and important mission. His lordship, we understand, is expected at his mansion in Belgrave Square some day during the ensuing week, to make final arrangements for his immediate departure."

The paper dropped from Lady Alresford's hands; she stood transfixed with sorrowful amazement. For one moment she breathed heavily, the next she caught up the paper, and without a moment's hesitation, opened the door, and firmly walking across the hall, entered the library.

Lord Alresford was standing with a letter in his hand near the fireplace. She precipitately advanced towards him.

"Lord Alresford, can this possibly be true?" burst in low, quivering accents from Mildred's lips, while her little hand trembled nervously, as she pointed to the paragraph.

Lord Alresford fixed his eyes earnestly upon her. Her beseeching glance, and the growing paleness of her cheek, seemed to implore a denial at his lips.

"What you read, Mildred, is perfectly true; though somewhat premature. The letter that I put into your hands this morning, contained my definitive acceptance of the mission," said the earl slowly, intently regarding her.

"And you are going? You abandon—you leave me, Lord Alresford, without warning, without preparation! Is this well? Is it right?" exclaimed she, vehemently.

"Ere I answer your question, tell me, Mildred, what difference my absence makes to you?"

"Lord Alresford, will my most earnest, most urgent entreaty, induce you to forego your resolution? Will you bear with me a little longer, and revoke this decision?" and involuntarily Mildred clasped her hands, while tears of anguish streamed down her cheeks.

"No, Mildred, I will not. Your request can but proceed from an unworthy desire to witness another proof of your power over me. I will not afford you such heartless triumph," said the earl bitterly, turning away.

She sank despairingly on the sofa.

"If you care for my happiness, my peace, stay, Lord Alresford, I conjure you!" murmured she.

"No, Mildred, your whole conduct proclaims that your peace will best be consulted by my absence. Return, then, to that home from whence I took you, in the vain delusion of combining your happiness with my own. You have sufficiently

shown me the impossibility of gaining your heart ; sufficiently indicated that neither time nor unwearied assiduity can make the least impression upon it. You have persisted in a series of heartless inconsistencies. There is, however, a limit to my forbearance. I have exhausted every means to win you ; and now, Mildred, I tell you that I will no longer submit to live subservient to your caprices, or to lead the life of restraint with you which I have hitherto done. You have excluded me from your confidence ; nay, to such a point has your indifference extended, that I, who long ago could have exacted all I wished from your obedience, have not even been admitted by you, my wife, to the privilege of intimate friendship. This our mutual false position I have irrevocably decided shall cease. Bitter as it will be to say farewell to you, Mildred, it——”

“Oh, say it not, Lord Alresford ! Have I not yet suffered enough ? Not yet sufficiently expiated the wrong that I once did you ?” said she, in a voice faltering with tears.

“Mildred, what do these tears, this agitation mean ? Why do *you* weep, who have so often repulsed and slighted my love ?” said Lord Alresford, with emotion, as he bent over her, and gently took her trembling hand.

“Your love ! Slighted your love ! Oh, what mean you, Lord Alresford ?” and Mildred raised her pale, tearful face with a glance of incredulous eagerness.

“Yes, triumph as you will, Mildred ; in listening to the confession of a love which kindles no responsive sympathy in your heart : yet, on the point of leaving you, perhaps for ever, you shall learn explicitly from my lips (should my whole past conduct have failed to enlighten you) that love for you—deep, passionate love—alone induced me to forgive your infidelity, and to make you my wife. You offered to renew our engagement—you told me your heart was free. Oh, Mildred, why did you deceive me on this point ? Why did you carry dissimulation so far that a life of misery has been prepared for us both, past retrieval ? Had you frankly owned your affection was another’s, I would have resigned you—even to that man most unworthy of you, Colonel Sutherland. Since our marriage, I have tried every device to win you. Sometimes I fancy that your heart relents ; but the next moment invariably disabuses me. Loving you still, Mildred, with unabated passion, I can no longer feign indifference—no longer support the distance we have maintained towards each other during these past five months : no, Mildred, neither would I if I could ! We must, therefore, separate.”

Mildred scarcely breathed : hope, joy, and love alternated in the changeful expression of her tearful eyes.

“Oh, Lord Alresford, all your unexampled love and forbear-

ance have not been lavished in vain. Why did you not tell me all this before? Why did you suffer me so long to struggle with dark thoughts, which grew, strengthened, and filled me with despair? Do you, indeed, still love me?" exclaimed she, rapidly and passionately.

"Mildred, the love I have borne you pervades every reminiscence: it is the one bright ray which sheds light and lustre on the past. I have loved you through your bitter infidelity and disdain; even after you cut me to the heart, by the cruel coldness of your greeting on my return from Italy. Then you were dear, inexpressibly dear to me, Mildred! you are still so now. But mark! I will accept no forced duty at your hands. Show me, at least, that you appreciate my character better, than to attempt, by a few kind words, to disarm the resolution that has been forming for months. I have seen you smile on Colonel Sutherland—have borne your slights with composure and apparent insensibility; and be assured, Mildred, I can, and will do so again."

With hasty, unsteady steps she advanced, her beautiful face suffused with vivid blushes, and knelt by the side of the couch on which the earl had momentarily thrown himself.

"How shall I atone for the misery my infatuation has occasioned? But if this be any satisfaction, learn, Lord Alresford, that my most ardent love has long been yours—that you alone have ever reigned in my heart; which thrills with joy and thankfulness to hear the words you have spoken. To be your loved wife is to attain the summit of worldly felicity and bliss! If you would avenge the anguish I have inflicted, leave me, but for no other cause, upon no other plea!" and she passionately threw herself on his bosom.

Lord Alresford hurriedly arose. The colour mounted to his brow.

"Mildred, can it be that I have so entirely mistaken your sentiments? No! you do not love me as I would be loved. Beware, lest you deceive me a second time!"

"If I loved you not, should I thus implore your affection and forgiveness? Oh, Lord Alresford, believe me, the feeling of your alienation and contempt has been a daily torment, far bitterer than I can express. Without your pardon, or without that affection which I have so long trifled with, life would be joyless! Will you refuse to believe what I say? Do you reject me, Lord Alresford? and will you not speak and tell me that I am forgiven?"

Soon she felt herself folded in his arms. That silent, passionate embrace spoke to her more eloquently than words: she knew that she was not yet banished from his heart. Tears of joy flowed down her cheeks.

"Oh, Mildred, tell me, then, for what purpose did you

practise this cruel dissimulation, and persist in an estrangement which must have wrung your heart also? Why did you decree that we should live strangers under the same roof? Wherefore did you shun me when I would have told you of my love, and flee from hearing those words which you have just now confessed thrill your heart with joy?"

"Because I doubted your love, and attributed your overtures to compassion. Yes: I, too, scorned that. Blinded by this delusion, I fled your society; for in your presence, I felt I must infallibly betray myself."

"But the cause--the source of your doubts, what was it? Mildred, will you not tell me?"

She raised her cheek, wet with tears, from his bosom. Hurriedly she passed her hand across her eyes.

"Yes, I will tell you all--all my folly and wickedness. It was pique at Lady Catherine Neville's influence over you, which first drove me to retaliate your supposed indifference by encouraging the attentions of Colonel Sutherland. It was the hasty conclusion that but for me she would now have been your loved wife, which filled me with the bitter pangs of distrust and anguish."

"Yet, Mildred, in our first private interview after my return from abroad, I told you that Lady Catherine was nothing to me. Then I obtained the first little glimmer of the feeling which rankled in your heart; and it was this knowledge alone that encouraged me to persevere in making you mine. I imagined I had then convinced you of the utter groundlessness of your suspicion. To revert again to the subject after you became my wife, I felt would be an insult to you. You never had reason to think me guilty of the slightest breach of faith; and since our marriage, surely the most acute suspicion could not detect aught wherewith to feed upon. Oh, Mildred! to this chimera we then owe the misery of the past six months," said Lord Alresford, reproachfully; though his arm still lingered fondly round her.

"I have erred, Lord Alresford, greatly: even I perceive beyond the limit of your forbearance; but yet I must plead extenuation for my offences. I was goaded by your reproaches and frequent praise of Lady Catherine, and cut to the heart that she should be preferred in your esteem. When you returned, you met me with cold haughtiness: you left me to my own heart's bitterness, apparently indifferent as to what course I took. I feared your censure, for I knew I deserved it: had but one word of love issued from your lips! Even after our marriage was finally arranged, you were still silent. Oh, why was this?"

"When I knew, Mildred, that another had spoken to you of love, sanctioned by your encouragement of his advances,

could I ask you, within the space of a few weeks afterwards, to make such a profession of attachment as would satisfy me? Besides which, Mildred, you repulsed my efforts to win your confidence: you made no endeavour to conciliate me; you suffered me to depart from the Priory,—you, who had consented to become my wife seven days afterwards—without one word of affection! without an effort to ascertain whether the galling remembrance of your infidelity was erased from my heart. Again, the evening before our marriage you preferred a solitary musing to my society. Can you wonder if I forbore, amid such countless marks of alienation, to speak to you on the subject of my love? I will not conceal, also, Mildred, that I felt profoundly irritated at what I then conceived your dissembling——”

“Yet, could you have read my heart, Lord Alresford; could you have seen the gratitude and joy with which it would have prized the smallest token of your regard, even your affection might have been satisfied.”

“If you thus loved me, Mildred, what meant your tears, your indifference on our wedding-day? Surely, if till then you feigned, was it not then time to undeceive me? Why did you not at once repudiate my hasty letter?”

“My tears flowed when I thought of the dear friends from whom you had that morning taken me. My flight was an involuntary impulse, which the next moment I returned to explain; but you were gone. Again you left me to combat alone my wayward folly. Your letter confirmed my suspicions of Lady Catherine’s influence:—but enough of this. Have these humiliating avowals lowered me in your esteem, Lord Alresford?” said she, beseechingly, raising her eyes timidly to his, surprised at the earl’s silence. “Am I forgiven?”

“Forgiven! My own Mildred, never have you been absent from my heart. I have lived in anticipation of the hour when you should thus own yourself vanquished by my love, and its happiness exceeds all that I dared to imagine!” said the earl, as he again passionately folded her on his bosom, and kissed her blushing cheek and lips.

She smiled.

“You relent—and will refuse this mission abroad? You will remain with me in England?” whispered she, at length raising her soft, beaming eyes to his face.

Lord Alresford did not answer, though he still held her to his heart.

“Lord Alresford, speak! Will you not now relinquish this project for my sake? Have I no influence? Is this the love you tell me of?” exclaimed she, rising in agitation.

“The affair has gone so far, dearest Mildred. Compose

yourself, and reflect whether I am not bound in honour to abide by an engagement I first proposed?"

She paused a few moments. Her looks of joyful gladness faded away.

"Better to have lost you before, when I thought you cold and indifferent, than now!" exclaimed she, in low troubled accents. "What shall I say? Alresford! dear Alresford, you must not—nay, shall not leave me. Say you will give this project up, or I shall think you care not for me, and design it as a punishment for my past transgressions. You cannot refuse my first petition! and I will reward you with double love, double devotion;" and Mildred twined her soft arms round the earl's neck, while warm tears fell from her cheek on his brow.

Gently Lord Alresford drew her again to his side. Her head sank on his bosom.

"Who would imagine, my own Mildred, that it is your lips which utter such words of entreaty? Do you remember the evening of my arrival at the Priory, dearest, and the terms in which you then alluded to our engagement—'what cannot—' you know the rest!"

"You overheard, then, my heartless words, and yet did not cast me from your heart? Can you ever forgive the anguish I have inflicted? Oh, Lord Alresford, I knew not what I did!" said she, hiding her face.

"Think not of it. Forget it, as I have long done, dearest Mildred. Let us wander no more, even in thought, amidst shadows which have passed for ever away."

"Yet, unless you grant my petition, I shall think you still harbour resentment," said she, and now a beautiful smile played upon her lips, as she met his glance. "Consider that so great an offence as mine demands a corresponding pardon. You smile. Say, Alresford, that my words have prevailed."

There was hope and trust in her clear earnest gaze, as she raised her eyes to his face.

"Mildred, you have conquered! My promise to Lord Woodburn is as yet only conditional. My letter of final acceptance lies on yonder table. On condition, therefore, of your very sincere repentance for the past, and entire undivided love for the future, I abandon it into your hands. Make what use of it you please."

An exclamation of joy escaped Mildred's lips; she bounded from his side, and holding the letter in triumph one minute, the next she dropped it into the middle of the blazing fire.

"I should advise your lordship to consult me on the composition of your next letter to the premier," said she, turning towards the earl with a bright smile, as she stood watching the progress of the flame while it consumed the paper.

"You do not, I see, Mildred, belie the propensity of your sisterhood; for show a woman her power, and she seldom fails to abuse it," rejoined the earl, laughing. "But I have still a most surprising history to relate: besides which, you have never asked me any question relative to the exculpation of your friend, Helen Campbell."

"No; I am now, however, very anxious to hear. Will it be indiscreet to ask what share Lady Catherine Neville bore in it?" said Mildred, laughing and returning to her seat by the earl's side.

"What at length satisfied you that Lady Catherine and myself were friends, and nothing more?"

"My own observation, added to what I gleaned of Lady Catherine's history from herself."

"I will now add one convincing proof more, Mildred. Lady Catherine had been married some four or five months before my arrival at the Priory."

"Married! Lady Catherine married: and to whom?"

Shortly and concisely, Lord Alresford then related the various adventures of the day. Mildred listened in mute astonishment.

"Dear Helen! her innocence has not been more triumphantly proved than I knew it would be. But you, my lord, what have you to say for your unbelief? Shall I tell you?" added she, laughingly. "You must be prepared to hear, with the best and most gracious deportment you possess, that Sir Gerard, totally vanquished, lays his heart and hand at Helen's feet: you must no longer talk of an unequal match; but immediately enter on terms of the strictest alliance and friendship with the future Lady Baynton."

"I am both eager and desirous to offer reparation to Miss Campbell for my involuntary error; and have already acknowledged her merit in the quarter where you suppose I have more influence than I really possess. Her noble disregard of self, when her dearest hopes thereby seemed dashed to the ground, is worthy of the highest admiration! I shall be proud of her friendship, if she will now bestow it upon me."

"A most handsome acknowledgment. But confess that you have not always thought so highly of Helen's merit."

"I own it. Miss Campbell's character had not then unfolded itself. She possessed unbounded influence over you; and your conduct, Mildred, presented such a tissue of inconsistencies, that I doubted the counsel she poured into your ear. My impatience at what I conceived your studied neglect, especially after her arrival here, made me fear that her power was neither wisely nor conscientiously exercised——"

"And yet, had I heeded Helen's words, I should have ten-

dered submission to your lordship long months ago; and even signed my capitulation at the Priory," cried Mildred, playfully.

"But could you then have done so from your heart, my own Mildred?"

"Perhaps; had your lordship condescended to ask me," replied she, with playful earnestness.

"It appears that we have been like two people obstinately groping about in a dreary desert; when, if we had but advanced a little, a beautiful garden would have unfolded to us its delights. Henceforth, dearest, let us have one will, even as we have owned one love; and let us abjure the very semblance of pique, which has wrought us such misery. My own Mildred, to be beloved by you, brings, indeed, unspeakable bliss!"

"You overwhelm me. Dearest Alresford, I am yours, and yours only; and, with all my faults, I will, nevertheless, prove to you that from henceforth I am your loving and devoted wife," murmured Mildred. Her fair face kindled as she encountered the earl's glance; and tears then involuntarily gathered in her downcast eyes. There was a pause of a few minutes: presently she exclaimed—

"But what have you done about informing Helen of her acquittal? I confess I had not heart to-day to write to her even these joyous tidings."

"Baynton sets off for Greysdon to-morrow. I was writing my letter of apology and explanation to Mr. Campbell when you entered, for him to present; as I promised to send it to the Chauntry early to-morrow morning. See, if what I have written already, in your opinion, does justice to your friend, Mildred; and as I have little more now than my signature to add, I will finish it immediately," said Lord Alresford, rising, and putting his letter into her hands.

"It says everything I could possibly desire. Dear Helen! this, surely, will speedily bring her back to share my happiness," exclaimed Lady Alresford, with a bright smile. "One question more, dear Alresford, without which, our explanations seem imperfect: how did you succeed in regaining this ring from Colonel Sutherland?"

"Another time you shall hear, dearest: we will not now revert to the subject. The joy this evening brings, my own Mildred, shall not be marred by aught of painful reminiscence."

She smiled, though tears glistened in her eyes, as she returned her husband's embrace; then, after a few minutes, she seated herself by him at the table. With what different feelings did Mildred now watch the words flow from his pen! How great the contrast between them, and the agonising

suspense of the morning! Presently, she drew a sheet of paper before her, and wrote a few hasty lines to Helen; for Mildred felt that her joy and thankfulness were imperfect, unless shared by that dear friend. She gave her note to Lord Alresford to enclose in his letter to Mr. Campbell; then, this duty of reparation over, and Helen's fair fame completely re-established, long did they discourse together. Again every hour, every day of their long months of coldness and alienation passed in review; and, as Mildred with throbbing heart and flushing cheek felt herself over and over again folded to her husband's heart, and heard his lips murmur in her ear those words of passionate love which she had ever despaired to hear, most cordially did she vow within herself to abjure that resentful sentiment of pique which had well nigh totally destroyed her peace.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

SUNSHINE AT THE RECTORY.

"WELL, Colin, what letters have you brought from the post this morning?" asked Mrs. Campbell, walking to the garden-gate to meet her son, whose return from his daily pilgrimage to the village post-office she had been anxiously awaiting.

"Oh, mother, what with our correspondence, Martin's shop bids fair to rival the General Post-office. Let me see; first, here is the *Times*; then, a letter from an old chum of mine, asking me to take a jaunt to the Highlands; next, a huge, awkward epistle for papa,—looks like a sick club circular——"

"Nonsense, Colin! you know very well what I mean. Are there any letters from D——shire?" interrupted Mrs. Campbell, impatiently.

"My dear mother, do moderate your anxiety: I shall get through my list in time. Next, comes a dainty-looking epistle, having 'Wardour Court' in magnificent capitals on the seal, addressed to Mrs. Campbell; and another of the same description, to Miss Campbell——"

"Well, Colin, give me these letters immediately, and carry the rest to your father;" and Mrs. Campbell took the two letters from her son's hand, and eagerly opened the one directed to herself.

"Well, mother?" said Colin, as he slowly walked by her

side, and observed the well-pleased smile which gradually diffused itself over Mrs. Campbell's face.

"Well, Colin, this letter is from Lady Catherine Neville, and completely establishes our dear Helen's innocence. I felt sure that Lady Catherine had something to do with it; though, even now, I do not know in what way; however, it does not signify much, as she says everything is explained. So you see, after your father and Helen's ridiculous mystery, I was the only one to hit the right nail on the head. Just as if I should quietly allow your sister to be sacrificed for a pack of nonsensical scruples!"

"Well, but mother, I don't understand: surely you did not write and accuse Lady Catherine on mere suspicion?"

"Well-grounded suspicion, as it has proved, Colin. Really your father and Helen, with their roundabout ways, remind me of the Gotham wise-acres who wanted to catch the cuckoo by hedging it in," cried Mrs. Campbell, laughing heartily, as, followed by Colin, she entered the room where Helen was engaged in giving a drawing-lesson to her sister Henrietta.

"See, Helen, here is a letter for you from Wardour Court," said Mrs. Campbell, putting the letter into her daughter's hand, then seating herself opposite to her to watch its effect.

Helen dropped her pencil, and took the letter more eagerly than she had ever done one before in her life. As she read, her fair face glowed with satisfaction and thankfulness.

"There, you need not tell me. I know that you are exonerated, and I congratulate you from my heart; but I can tell you, my dear, that you may thank me for it."

"Mamma, it is very true no particle of blame now attaches itself to my conduct; but this letter is in answer to one I wrote to Lady Catherine."

"Then you and your father had wit enough to do that, which is more than I gave you credit for. I suspected, Helen, that your father would encourage you in those silly notions with which your head was filled on your return; therefore, I just took the liberty of writing to Lady Catherine (as I made out, my dear, that she was the last person in your company on that evening) and requested her merely to state to Lord Alresford what she knew of your conduct, and she sends me in answer this pretty, civil letter," said Mrs. Campbell, tossing the letter to Helen.

"Oh, mamma, how could you do so? You might have made dreadful mischief by your interference. Dear Lady Catherine! I would not have exposed her to this for worlds," exclaimed Helen in dismay.

"Not at all, Helen. You and your father did not choose to take me into your confidence; therefore neither did I choose to submit to have my daughter sent home under the stigma of

unmerited disgrace. Lady Catherine says, that everything is explained, so I suppose I may venture now to ask who the heroine of the midnight ramble was. Stay, Henrietta, my love, go to the fruit-chamber, and turn the pears, while I speak a few words with your sister; you will find my keys on the dining-room table. Make haste, child!" cried Mrs. Campbell, as Henrietta slowly arose from her chair; her curiosity, perhaps, being as much excited as her mother's, to know the mystery which had kept the latter in perpetual worry ever since her sister's return home. "And now, my dear, what does her ladyship say for herself? How has she exculpated you?"

"By the most generous self-sacrifice. Oh, mamma! you cannot appreciate the extent of Lady Catherine's noble unselfishness. You did not witness, as I did, her distress at the idea that her weakness should be exposed even to my humble scrutiny; therefore, think what she must have felt to disclose all to Lord Alresford," said Helen, with emotion.

"All what, Helen? You speak in enigmas."

"That it was she who met her lover, or her betrothed, Lord Normanton, in the gardens at Amesbury."

"Ah, and so Lord Alresford mistook you for Lady Catherine and wished to fix the blame on you, my poor Helen. May I look at her letter? There is something under the rose yet in this engagement, take my word for it," said Mrs. Campbell, when she had finished its perusal. Lady Catherine and Lord Normanton are of equal rank, and both free agents: therefore why need they resort to clandestine interviews? besides, you see, Lady Catherine says herself, that she has further explanations for your private ear when you meet. Helen, you do not look half so rejoiced as you ought at the news."

"Not rejoiced, mamma! I cannot tell you how thankful I feel at my prompt acquittal. I am perhaps a little overpowered, that is all," rejoined Helen, tears trembling in her eyes.

"Yes; nothing can be more handsome than Lady Catherine's acknowledgments; besides, she appears herself quite rejoiced at the unexpected turn affairs have taken. Depend upon it, that you have done her a service in compelling her to own her engagement; though I must say, my dear, that she seems a pretty forward young lady, to make private assignments at night with gentlemen. She will find it necessary to get rid of some of her Italian habits; they will never go down here in England. I wonder you have not heard from Mildred; or, at any rate, received an avowal from Lord Alresford that he has done you injustice."

"Perhaps I am a very little surprised also. The earl may not have received Lady Catherine's acknowledgment in time

to write by this morning's post. I am certain, mamma, that Lord Alresford's sense of right will not suffer him long to delay doing me justice, and to-morrow will bring his recantation."

"People, my dear Helen, who find leisure to scrutinise so closely their neighbour's failings, should also devise prompt means for making amends for their harsh misconstructions. These arrogant, high, and mighty people seldom like to own themselves in the wrong. His lordship, I fancy, however, must have been rather taken aback at the confession of his paragon, Lady Catherine."

"Mamma, I beseech you do not talk of Lord Alresford in this manner. Believe me, nothing could have surpassed his kindness and delicacy. I must have appeared guilty, indeed, when I owned myself able, and yet refused, to solve his doubts."

"Well, my dear, I trust the earl will have candour enough to set Sir Gerard Baynton right. I own I am both surprised and vexed at the latter's silence. If I thought that Lord Alresford intended to shuffle off an explanation with him, I would——" and Mrs. Campbell suddenly paused, and attentively scrutinised the hem of her pocket handkerchief.

"You would—what, mamma?" cried Helen, lifting up her eyes in alarm.

"Oh, nothing, my dear Helen. Good gracious! what ails you, child?"

"Mamma, promise me most solemnly, that you will not, by word or deed, interfere between Sir Gerard and me. I assure you, such interference will be fatal to every hope you may have formed for me in that quarter," said Helen, earnestly.

"Nonsense, my dear Helen, you need not fear my indiscretion."

"Promise me, mamma."

"Helen, you are too ridiculous. What can I do?"

"I don't know. You wrote to Lady Catherine without my knowledge. Will you promise, mamma?"

"Well, well, Helen, calm yourself. I promise, my dear. We shall be better able to tell how affairs stand when we have heard from Amesbury."

"I know, of late, that it is the dearest wish of your heart to see me Sir Gerard Baynton's wife. Now, should he offer to me, mamma, and I discover that his proposals are made in consequence of any hint or secret promptings of yours, I declare most solemnly, that I never will accept of his hand. Mamma, do not interfere: believe me, I have sufficient interest in his heart, should he ever resolve to match so lowly," said Helen, vehemently.

"I don't know what you mean, Helen, by lowly: but it is

my opinion, if Sir Gerard offers to you, that the advantage will be mutual. He will share with you his riches and consequence; but you will give him heart to enjoy them, which is more than a fine titled wife probably would do. Lady Emily is quite an exception to the general rule, so pray do not quote her. But, my dear Helen, what do you think Sir Gerard will do now? It was a thousand pities that this stupid affair intervened, when everything was going on so smoothly; and, now I understand all the ins-and-outs of the matter, I confess, my dear, I think that it was much ado about nothing, with a vengeance, to sweep from Amesbury in that tragic style, when your remedy in appealing to Lady Catherine lay so near at hand."

"I am sorry you think so, dear mamma. Papa approves entirely of my conduct," replied Helen, calmly.

Mrs. Campbell sat for some time immersed in profound thought. At length she said,—

"I should not wonder, Helen, if the earl's letter does not contain a pressing request for your return to Amesbury."

"Nor I, mamma."

"Of course, my dear, you will go; for Lord Alresford is sure to insist upon it as a point of honour: besides, Mildred would be grieved, indeed, at your refusal. You think with me on this subject; do you not, Helen?"

"Yes, mamma. To make you easy at once—should Lord Alresford ask me, I own I do not see the wisdom of saying no: especially as it was my own act and deed to leave his house."

"I think you are right, my dear child." Then Mrs. Campbell added after a pause, "I see your father is just returned from the Rectory, so go now, dear Helen, and rejoice his heart with the good news of your fair fame being re-established. In the meantime, I shall walk down to the village and hurry on the washerwoman to send your muslin gowns this evening, in case of sudden emergency; for you may be called upon to depart again at a moment's warning," said Mrs. Campbell, as she left the room.

Helen made no reply; for her mother's supposition appeared to her the most unlikely event possible: but she quietly followed her out of the room and went to seek her father, to whom she longed to impart the happy tidings of her exculpation. In him Helen always found a ready sympathiser in her joys and sorrows; for Mr. Campbell, without forgetting his relative position as a parent, possessed the happy art of winning and retaining his child's confidence. To his advice she resorted on every occasion, and it was difficult to say upon which face beamed the brightest smile of affection when the study door gently opened, and Helen entered with Lady Cathe-

rine's letter in her hand. Mr. Campbell, like his wife, expressed surprise that no letter from Lord Alresford announced his daughter's vindication : yet he felt that this acknowledgment would not long tarry ; and both Helen and her father were too rejoiced at her release from a humiliating suspicion, to feel very aggrieved at the omission.

Her colloquy over with Mr. Campbell, Helen returned to the drawing-room, and taking up her work, resumed her seat. Mrs. Campbell, as she announced her intention of doing, had walked into the village, taking Henrietta with her ; so Helen found herself at liberty to pursue the thread of her meditations, without danger of those perpetual interruptions and commotions in the room, which her mother's locomotive mania rendered of hourly occurrence. At times her needle busily sped, at others the work drooped on her knee, and she thought : once again her young heart permitted itself to dwell on that short though brightest period of her life, since her acquaintance with Sir Gerard Baynton began ; and again her dream of love unconsciously revived in her reverie. She felt, also, unfeignedly thankful for her vindication ; for Helen possessed too sensitive and feeling a heart to treat with cool disregard the malice, and ill-natured gossip, of the neighbourhood, as to the cause of her sudden return home. Lady Elvaston, and Mrs. Campbell especially, had both over and over again confirmed the general impression that her visit would probably extend over some months ; besides which, Sir Richard Tennyson and his sister loudly expressed their astonishment, and hinted that neither Lady Alresford nor Miss Campbell contemplated so speedy a separation, when they took leave of them at Amesbury on the previous day. Public opinion, therefore, which seldom sides with the weak, settled that on some account Helen had incurred the earl's displeasure, and consequently met with an unceremonious dismissal from Amesbury : a version of the story received by most with the greatest zest, as much jealousy had been formerly excited, amongst the younger ladies of the county, at Miss Campbell's intimacy and influence at the Priory.

Since her supposed disgrace, however, Helen had been honoured by a much larger share of Clara Tennyson's *bienveillance* than formerly : not, however, that Miss Tennyson espoused her cause from a conviction that she had been hardly dealt with, for this Clara had no opportunity of deciding ; but because the rule of contrary was so strongly implanted in her bosom, that what others censured, she could not refrain from patronising. Therefore, though she talked loudly, and publicly canvassed Helen's assumed disgrace, punishment, and decreased influence with Lady Alresford, yet Miss Tennyson almost daily visited her ; and even went the length of vowing

that she would not be married at all, unless Helen Campbell might be allowed to officiate as her bridesmaid.

Mrs. Wedderbourne, meanwhile, in her conduct towards the Campbells, proceeded with more characteristic worldliness. She felt that it was not quite safe to let Helen drop, until her noble friends declared their disgust by still more overt acts of indifference.

Mrs. Wedderbourne, however, firmly resolved to follow the earl's example, whether he frowned or smiled: especially as she had planned the scheme of a second grand entertainment, to which he was to be invited, on his first visit to the Priory; and till she could satisfactorily ascertain his disposition towards Helen, she adopted an intermediate policy, and directed her Niece Caroline to do the same.

It was not long, however, before Helen's sensitive spirit indignantly detected, that her popularity by the worldly few was made greatly to depend upon the fiat of her friends. Had she been a few years older, perhaps Helen might have borne these petty slights more philosophically; for sooner or later in life, every individual, unless the purse of Fortunatus hangs at his girdle, is made to acknowledge with the royal psalmist of Israel, that only "so long as thou doest well unto thyself, men will speak good of thee." Helen still sat by the fire absorbed in these ruminations, when a ring at the hall-door startled her, and feeling too disinclined to entertain visitors in her mother's absence, she laid down her work and swiftly passed into the adjoining room, intending to seek refuge in her own chamber. After a brief interval, she heard the sound of steps in the passage, and then the door of her father's study opened and closed, and all was still; so, concluding that the visit was to him from one of the neighbouring clergy (for Mr. Campbell was deservedly popular), she quietly returned to the drawing-room, and resumed her occupation again.

Presently Mr. Campbell just put his head into the room, and retreated again, leaving the door open. Helen looked up, and then rose with the intent of seeking her father, when her purpose was put to flight by the sudden entrance of Sir Gerard Baynton. For a minute, her senses almost refused credence to the reality of his presence, and she stood with palpitating heart and glowing cheek.

"Helen!" said Sir Gerard, hastily closing the door, and advancing towards her he took her hand.

"Sir Gerard!"

"Helen, I am here, hoping to be the first to announce the happy tidings of your vindication, by Lady Catherine's avowal of her engagement to Lord Normanton." Sir Gerard paused; he still retained her hand: it shook in his grasp. "Helen, dear Helen!" continued he impetuously, "I know not why I should

address you in this strain of cool compliment. No! I came not to announce your vindication alone: for what is it to me, who never believed you guilty of the thing laid to your charge? No; I am here to throw myself at your feet—as I should equally have done had not a word passed Lady Catherine's lips; to tell you that I have long ardently loved you; and to implore you to confirm those hopes, which your manner, especially on the last evening we spent together at Amesbury, raised almost into the transporting certainty that I am not indifferent to you. Helen! I know you will not trifle with me: can you—do you love me well enough to become my wife?" asked Sir Gerard, in a voice of passionate emotion.

Helen trembled violently, and covered her face with her hands. Sir Gerard saw that she wept.

"Helen, my own Helen! Why do you not answer me? Nay, I will be satisfied with nothing less than a direct avowal that my love—my devotion, are rewarded by your heart," continued he. "Will you be my wife—my idolised wife, Helen?" and Sir Gerard gently removed the little hands which concealed her face.

A few softly murmured words fell from her lips. She was happy, inexpressibly happy.

Sir Gerard took her in his arms, and folded her to his heart.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

MR. TURVILLE ABANDONS HIS SUIT.

"MAY I venture to transgress, Catherine, and come in?" asked Mr. Turville, pausing on the threshold of the glass door opening on the terrace, one fine morning, about a week after the occurrence of the event that exercised so important an influence over the destiny of our heroines.

Lady Catherine had not since seen her cousin. A vivid blush suffused her cheeks as she raised her eyes from her book.

"Oh yes, come in, Charles; if only it be to make humble acknowledgment of my clemency in not returning a stern negative, as a punishment for your presuming to think it necessary to make such a demand," replied she, trying to laugh off her embarrassment.

Mr. Turville entered the room and took a chair opposite to his cousin. He contemplated her silently and earnestly for some minutes. The changeful, happy expression of Lady Catherine's beautiful face appeared to strike him. Her full, dark eye had lost that painful, subdued look, which ever seemed to rebuke the smile on her lip, and her brow its air of melancholy pensiveness. She now met her cousin's scrutinising gaze unflinchingly: and yet, too, her face expressed deep, affectionate sympathy. She thought that he looked pale and abstracted; and the desire to console, to reason him into greater confidence and content with himself and all the world, strongly possessed her. For some moments longer Mr. Turville watched the varying colour on her cheek.

"I should not have presumed to visit you, Catherine, unless I had first obtained Lord Normanton's permission. I have called upon him this morning," said he, at length, in short, constrained tones.

"Then it is only towards me, Charles, that you harbour a spirit of unforgiving resentment; as the bitterness of your tone implies?" said Lady Catherine, sorrowfully.

"Unforgiving towards you! No, Catherine. You, who I—but enough of this. Tell me, do you expect me to congratulate you?"

"Nay, do you not rejoice with me a little, Charles? Were you not sincere in all those protestations for my happiness, which made me hate myself for the pain I was inflicting upon

one so kind and generous? Is it my fault, Charles, that you persisted, spite of my vehement assurance, in cherishing a hope that I might one day return your love? Oh, no, I told you, in language emphatic and clear, that it could never, never be!" replied Lady Catherine, hastily.

"And you, therefore, ask my sympathy, Catherine? Mine! You expect such total abnegation of self! Yet you have it; for I love you still too devotedly, too dearly, not to rejoice at your happiness, though it be reared on the wreck of my own. But, Catherine, the bitter pang is, that for this Mr. Randolph—or Lord Normanton, you totally sacrificed me. At a whim, the creation of his jealous fancy, you banished me from your presence, without a thought of the pain your sentence inflicted. No man had the right, in defiance of your will, to dictate such an action, therefore——"

"Stay, Charles, you refused to be convinced of the hopelessness of your attachment, therefore I had no other resource than to deny myself to you."

"Do you assert that no influence was exercised over you by Lord Normanton, and that anxiety for my peace would alone have prompted this same course, had his lordship been totally out of the question?" demanded Mr. Turville, bitterly.

"Perhaps, Charles, not quite so stringent a one," replied Lady Catherine, while a slight smile curled her lip.

"No, Catherine, you cannot affirm it," rejoined he. "You once promised to explain all this mystery; now, therefore, tell me, why did Lord Normanton assume a disguise to win you?"

"Lord Normanton's disguise was prompted, in the first instance, by the noblest of self-sacrifices; and afterwards, this imperative necessity availed him to assure himself that no external circumstance influenced the gift I made him of my heart," responded Lady Catherine, in a low tone.

"To my mind, a jealous susceptibility like this is near akin to hatred," quickly replied Mr. Turville. "But you have not yet stated, Catherine, the nature of Lord Normanton's self-sacrifice," continued he, after a pause.

"Lord Normanton, to save the life or liberty of a near relative who had deeply, ungratefully defrauded him, hesitated not to adopt the only painful resource left him to effect his generous purpose; and, nobly throwing aside all the privileges of his station, lived in exile and obscurity, bound by a solemn vow not to divulge his true name and rank until Mr. Conway was safely beyond the consequences of his crime," replied Lady Catherine.

Mr. Turville did not speak for some moments.

"I remember perfectly well Mr. Conway's arrest on the

scandalous charge of forgery, and everyone's surprise at the affair being suddenly hushed up in the mysterious manner it was," at length said he, slowly. "Well, Catherine, I acknowledge this generous fortitude on Lord Normanton's part was noble in the extreme: nay, his chivalrous adherence to his word is a deed worthy of the highest admiration and applause. But six months have passed since Mr. Conway obtained his discharge; for what purpose, then, has he since persisted in torturing you, and rendering your life miserable by anxious misgiving?"

"Can you not divine, Charles? For what reason did I most reluctantly decline to receive you here on our former intimate terms?"

Mr. Turville again made no reply, and for a considerable time sat silently opposite to his cousin, buried in deep thought. Lady Catherine leaned her elbow on the window-seat, and listlessly turned the leaves of the book on her knee.

"Catherine," exclaimed Mr. Turville, suddenly catching her hand, "you have not forbidden me to guess at the remainder of your secret: for still I feel that you have not told me all. There is but one thing which can explain the extraordinary—arbitrary influence exercised over you by Mr. Randolph—there is but one circumstance that could justify his demand and your obedience—it is that this ring, to which I once before alluded, is not your mother's, but was placed by Lord Normanton on your finger ere you quitted Italy. Is it so, Catherine?"

She hastily withdrew her hand. The vivid colour fluctuated in her cheek.

"Tell me if it be so, Catherine? Perhaps, then, I may reflect with less bitterness on the past; may not feel so totally nothing in your estimation——"

"I owe you some explanation. Yes, Charles, you are right. My hand was not in my power to bestow, from the very first day we met," exclaimed Lady Catherine, hurriedly.

"I see; and you were drooping under the burden of your secret union with an unknown. Catherine, I read now the explanation of that anguish which made my heart bleed to witness. And this is love! This is Mr. Randolph's love!" exclaimed Mr. Turville, indignantly.

"Yes, Charles; a love, sincere and precious even for its distrust, which I would not relinquish for the treasures of the world: a love which spared me anguish indescribable. Even when convinced of my unswerving affection, a keen and chivalrous sense of honour induced Lord Normanton to delay the recognition of his marriage until after that most unhappy encounter with Colonel Sutherland; and I glory in awarding my unfeigned applause to his decision!" exclaimed Lady Catherine, her bright eyes flashing.

"Lady Normanton could not properly express herself otherwise than you have just done, Catherine," replied Mr. Turville, in his sharpest, driest manner.

Lady Catherine arose from her seat.

"This is inexcusable, Charles! Did you visit me this morning only to insult and outrage my feelings? I will tell you no more. This bitter spirit is unworthy of my confidence," said she, resentfully, moving towards the door.

"Forgive me! The anguish of knowing you irreparably lost to me makes me heedless even of incurring your resentment. Go not, Catherine! Give me your confidence, and I will be more cautious in my comments. I will strive to remember that I see in you Lord Normanton's wife," exclaimed Mr. Turville, hastily rising and detaining her.

The saddened tones of his voice kindled Lady Catherine's pity.

"Oh, Charles, why will you persist in talking to me thus? Listen, dear cousin; this subject, after our present interview, must never be renewed between us—never! You must try and forget me, Charles: forget that you ever thought of me in any other light than that of an affectionate friend and sister. Now, as you desire it, and as I think that it is also due to myself, you shall hear the whole of my history; only remember, dear Charles, I confide it to you in strict confidence: none besides yourself, Lord Alresford, and one or two others, know of my private marriage or betrothal to Lord Normanton, as the earl properly insists that it shall be considered;" and Lady Catherine then briefly, in a clear and, at times, slightly faltering voice, related to her cousin the principal passages of her connection with Lord Normanton.

"And when is the ceremony of your marriage to be performed again, Catherine?" asked Mr. Turville, some minutes after Lady Catherine concluded, rousing from another fit of abstraction.

"Soon, I believe; but the time is yet uncertain," replied Lady Catherine, hastily.

"Because on that day I mean to leave England. I have already made arrangements for breaking up my establishment at Nethercote. Do not attempt to dissuade me, Catherine," said he, observing symptoms of surprise and disappointment on his cousin's face. "In a year or two I may return home sobered, rational, and able to contemplate Lord Normanton's happiness without a bitter murmur that my lot has been less blessed," added Mr. Turville, sorrowfully.

For some minutes Lady Catherine was silent. She felt it almost unbecoming, hard-hearted, to attempt to argue on the insufficiency of the grounds on which her cousin proposed to expatriate himself.

"Wait awhile, dear Charles; for my sake consent to delay your project for three months." He was silent. Lady Catherine continued gently, after a pause, "Maude Conway suffered deeply; yet, Charles, she found not her grief incurable."

"She loved not then with the deep abandonment of heart, like I have done," responded he, shortly and moodily.

Lady Catherine thought that perhaps hereafter this very fact might prove Mr. Turville's greatest comfort and consolation.

"Colonel Sutherland was scarcely the man to inspire profound attachment," promptly rejoined she, gladly shifting the conversation from herself. "He has written a most penitential letter to Maude, expressive of the greatest contrition for the past, earnestly suing for forgiveness, and imploring permission to renew his addresses."

"And Miss Conway consented?"

"Most certainly not. Colonel Sutherland, every way so treacherous and unstable, could never hope for pardon. Poor Maude shudders whenever his name is mentioned in her presence."

"Yes, he was unworthy; therefore Miss Conway speedily banished him from her heart. Our cases are not parallel, Catherine."

She made no reply; but rising from her chair approached the window. Mr. Turville presently joined her; Lady Catherine hoped with the intent of saying farewell—for the prolonged interview was becoming irksome and embarrassing. He, however, evinced no such inclination, and she turned therefore, and took up her book; then in another minute hastily laid it down, and approached the window again.

"Frederick!" exclaimed she, suddenly, as two beautiful dogs bounded past on the terrace.

"Yes, yonder comes Lord Normanton. Catherine, I cannot stay to witness his happiness. Farewell! we shall meet on the morning of your marriage! May you find every blessing, every joy in your union. Farewell!" and Mr. Turville precipitately quitted the room.

A few tears suffused Lady Catherine's eyes, and she stood a moment in silent thought. Soon, however, a smile lighted her beautiful features, and she stepped out on the terrace to welcome Lord Normanton.

"I thought to have found Mr. Turville here, Catherine," exclaimed he, as they presently entered the room together.

"He has just left me. Poor Charles! Never was there a truer or more honourable heart than his. I would give much to see him happy again," replied Lady Catherine, gravely.

"Which means, I suppose, Catherine, that had I delayed until now to strive for undivided empire over your heart, I

should have found it strongly garrisoned enough to defy all my attacks. This formidable cousin of yours came to Moreton this morning ; and, upon my word, uttered the sharpest rebuke possible for my past jealousy, by asking, in the coolest, driest manner conceivable, permission to call upon you," exclaimed Lord Normanton, laughing.

"And you deserved it, Frederick. Had it not been for your suspicious distrust and injurious disbelief in human faith and truth, poor Charles would have been saved much that he has undergone. Had you suffered me, after your arrival in England, to have declared myself yours, and then told me all, what sorrow, indeed, should we not all have been spared !"

"Catherine, it is your example, your own bright truth and love, which alone make me regret the past. In you, I perceive that there is such a thing as pure, disinterested affection. In the world, cold, calculating interest, interferes in the dearest relations of life : for why do the majority of women marry, but from a desire to throw off parental restraint, or to obtain either wealth or station ? Even these perverted principles I heard my own mother instil into the ears of my innocent sisters : I heard her tell them that an establishment was everything—the heart nothing. I became then suspicious, and loathed the smiles of the pretty triflers who caressed me only because I was wealthy and a lord. I panted to be loved for myself. Catherine, my own Catherine, though from childhood upwards you have ever dwelt in my heart, yet even you I suspected. You had rank and wealth equal to my own ; these, then, could not be your objects : yet I knew that our union would be considered a desirable event by both our families, and I feared lest you might be persuaded into it by motives of policy and expediency. I met you again, my Catherine, while suffering most keenly under the disadvantages and mortifications of my enforced exile. Your smile and glance kindled the love I had long borne you into almost idolatrous worship. I resolved at once, therefore, to make my compulsory disguise subservient to the bitter distrust which still rankled in my mind : to prove whether my passionate devotion had roused feelings as intense and ardent in your heart—and need I say I obtained proof greater, oh, far greater, than I dared hope. Do you, however, thoroughly pardon, my own Catherine, the miserable suspense my jealous doubts entailed after my arrival in England ? When, after having heard of Robert Conway's safe embarkation for America, I might have revealed the mystery which shrouded me, and yet refrained ?" and Lord Normanton turned impetuously, eagerly towards her.

"Infidel ! you deserve the severest punishment in my power to inflict, for harbouring these doubts : yet, nevertheless, I feel rather proud of my convert." She paused : "No, dear

Frederick, I am too happy, too thoroughly content with my lot, to quarrel with you for the past : but never more let the trust I have so hardly won be shaken," said Lady Catherine, earnestly.

"Never, Catherine!" After a pause, Lord Normanton resumed—"Tell me, when am I to receive your hand from Lord Alresford? I confess, Catherine, that I am beginning to weary of playing the lover so long, and shall take upon myself to write to Mr. Clare and fix a time for our marriage, or resort to the more desperate step of carrying you off to Witham. It is ten months since I placed this ring on your finger, my Catherine; is it not now time to reward my patience and love—time that the world should know you mine?"

"Your confession is a very bold one, Frederick; weary already of playing the lover! I wonder what you will tell me this day six months," exclaimed Lady Catherine, turning aside her blushing cheek.

"That you are loved, if possible, tenfold more devotedly and entirely. But, listen, Catherine, to what I have done. For once I have made arbitrary use of my power over you, and have written to Lord Alresford, appointing Thursday next as the day on which you will confirm anew our union. The earl perfectly coincides in my desire, and suggests, moreover, that the ceremony shall take place privately in Amesbury Church; only in the presence of our respective families. Nay, Catherine dearest, it is perfectly needless assuming that pretty air of displeasure, despite the mortifying fact that your hands are tied, and that you have nothing for it but to submit graciously to the loss of the privilege so highly prized by ladies in general, of resorting to a species of guerilla warfare to delay their submission," said Lord Normanton, laughingly.

"And Lord Alresford—has he actually committed the solecism of consenting to your request without previously consulting me?" exclaimed Lady Catherine, demurely.

"Indeed, he has. Nay, dearest, I know you will suffer no foolish scruples to delay my happiness. I must have you all to myself, and long to carry you off to Witham, where you once so stoutly refused to follow me. You consent, Catherine?"

Her beautiful eyes fell under his gaze. She attempted to rise from her chair.

"No; you are my prisoner until you promise," exclaimed Lord Normanton, throwing his arm lightly round her. "Promise next Thursday to lay aside your heiress-ship, and surrender at discretion."

"Nay, Frederick, I am very angry at this importunity," responded Lady Catherine, with downcast eyes, though a smile flitted on her lip. "Consider, as we conceal the past, how strange this hasty marriage will appear in the neighbourhood."

"I care not, Catherine; and am resolved to be deprived no longer of your constant society, beyond Thursday next. I am in a condition to prove, with Mr. Clare's assistance, our undoubted marriage at Narbonne; and this, if you will not consent to my proposal, is what I shall immediately set about doing. I love you too ardently, patiently to undergo a repetition of our courtship: you are my wife, and such I will immediately acknowledge you. Surely Catherine, it is too late now to begin to play the coquette! Let me hear your decision," said Lord Normanton, in those persuasive yet resolute tones which exercised such influence over her.

"Well, Frederick, my decision is, that considering the length of time I have been yours—considering that I love you dearly—and considering that you leave me no choice in the matter, I consent!" rejoined Lady Catherine, archly; though the colour suffused her cheek.

"As a loving, obedient wife ought to do. Ah, Catherine, you cannot tyrannise over me now!" said Lord Normanton, laughing, as he kissed her glowing cheek.

"I have been writing to Isabella this morning," observed Lady Catherine, blushing to resume her work.

"So has Maude. It seems she intends still to remain in Paris for some weeks longer. I am sorry to see that Isabella's selfish pursuit of pleasure makes her so lamentably deficient in her sense of what is due to her family, as to remain the guest of Mrs. St. Priest; a connection of the man who has so deeply injured her sister. But do not let us talk of Isabella: it makes me sad to think of what she might have been, and what she is."

"If she could only be drawn from Mrs. St. Priest's influence," observed Lady Catherine, glancing at Lord Normanton, on his allusion to Colonel Sutherland. Perceiving, then, that for the first time since the duel, his arm was unsupported by a sling, she hastily added—"Frederick, I hope you are not imprudently using your arm again without medical permission?"

"No; I am quite well again, so you need not fear, dearest, being subjected to the panic which assailed you in the Hermitage at Amesbury. To think that the slipping of a bandage should have caused you so much needless alarm!"

"Not needless: your imprudence then might have been fatal," rejoined Lady Catherine, shuddering.

"My eagerness to see you, Catherine, doubtless, made me greatly anticipate the hour I fixed; for I waited a considerable time for you—indeed, as long as I was able. I only discovered, after my return, the cause of the sudden faintness which overpowered me. The wound was too slightly bound for such an expedition: for you may be sure I cautiously concealed my projected visit to Amesbury."

"Suppose Lord Alresford had accosted you, Frederick?"

"I was then a stranger to the earl, and should have devised some excuse. But, Catherine, my anxiety afterwards became insupportable. Lord Alresford's visit was a release, indeed, from most terrible suspense; though the following day I had resolved to see you."

"The earl displayed, in my opinion, most unjust partiality in administering his reprimands on our conduct. It seems that you, Frederick, who were the principal culprit, escaped with the most courteous of censures; whilst I literally felt overwhelmed with the enormity of my offence, as represented to me," said Lady Catherine, with a smile.

"The confession of your marriage to an unknown, whose abode you could not even state, was rather an appalling avowal to make to a guardian, we must acknowledge, Catherine. Lord Alresford's very kind reception of my explanation and excuses must, I suppose, be attributed to his delight that you had not quite reduced yourself to the strait he apprehended."

"I wonder whether we shall see Helen Campbell before—before we go to Witham!" said Lady Catherine, after a pause. "You will admire her very much, I feel assured, Frederick. Mildred drove over to tell me yesterday of her engagement to Sir Gerard Baynton; which event, you know, your *escapade* at Amesbury nearly frustrated."

"I am prepared to feel eternally indebted to Miss Campbell. Her noble unselfishness, Catherine, deserves the reward of such a heart as Baynton's. Should she not be present on Thursday next?"

"I will write immediately and request it. I am sure Helen will come; though I dare say Lady Alresford has heard from her again. But here comes dear Maude. I think you told me, Frederick, that she was going this morning to Amesbury, so she will bring us the latest news," exclaimed Lady Catherine, as Miss Conway entered the room.

Maude, however, had not been to Amesbury; for, as usual, Lady Normanton's capricious humours frustrated her design. The knowledge that her son had won, and was on the point of marriage with, the heiress of Wardour (for their previous union at Narbonne was carefully concealed from her), at first excited Lady Normanton's rapture and astonishment; and still in Lord Normanton's presence she descanted upon it with the utmost complacency. After a time, however, in her private dialogues with Maude, the most peevish complaints escaped her lips, that her son had not paid her the compliment of confiding his attachment to her; and fretful suppositions ever followed, that from henceforth all his love and interest would be centred in Lady Catherine, to her entire exclusion. Maude allowed her mother's discontent free course; and by never combating it,

obtained for the household a considerably greater degree of tranquillity than would have been the case had Isabella been at home to provoke Lady Normanton's irritable temper by stinging sarcasm.

Maude's greatest joy was to fly from her troublous home, and accompany her brother in his daily visits to Wardour; and as Lord Normanton peremptorily insisted that she should not be confined a constant prisoner in her mother's chamber, this pleasure was frequently hers: the only one that could now impart momentary satisfaction and delight; for Miss Conway lamented deeply the disappointment which had befallen her. When Maude gave her heart to Colonel Sutherland, she did it honestly, with a thorough conviction that in him she had found that congeniality of disposition, honour, and sincere attachment which would ensure her future happiness: and of all sorrows there is none greater than the struggle to cast from the affection one formerly very dear; aggravated by the secret consciousness that he has fallen—fallen not only from the high pinnacle on which our own partiality elevated him, but also in the esteem and approbation of all good, right thinking men. Her spirits were more subdued; yet, though she grieved, a feeling of thankfulness also mingled in Maude's regrets, that she had been preserved from a union with a man whose conduct must finally have rendered her life one hard struggle between duty and alienation.

With a smile on her lip—a resigned if not an entirely happy one—Maude often turned her thoughtful earnest eyes, and contemplated with thankful heart her beloved brother's happiness: it dissipated the bitterness of her grief, and proved to her that loving, steadfast devotion was no ideal. Catching, therefore, something of the reflex of his trustful joy, Maude took courage; and insensibly, though surely, the hope at length sprang up within her, that a time might come when even she should taste of this bliss of being so beloved. Chastened, therefore, though not desponding, Maude in a humble spirit submitted to her allotted share of the great lesson of life. Taught thereby wisdom and resignation, her disappointment was blessed to her; and like a tree cut down to the root, that for long exhibits no signs of vitality, but which afterwards springs forth in renovated freshness and beauty, so Maude Conway, after a brief eclipse, smiled again, and thankfully acknowledged that if this world of ours be a world of grievous trial and trouble, it is also one of numberless blessings; while His infinite mercy and love who created all things, sheds even a halo around the severest affliction.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

PEACE.

It would be needless to give any description of Mrs. Campbell's delight, when, on her return from the village, she found her daughter and Sir Gerard Baynton together ; our readers must have obtained insight enough into her aspiring, enterprising disposition to imagine her transports. Suffice it to say, that the warmth of her welcome delighted Sir Gerard, and her joy kindled even a sunnier smile on Helen's happy face.

The following few days were days of exquisite, unmingled happiness to Helen ; to which Mildred's brief letter contributed not a little. That her loved friend should be restored to peace, and her own lot so joyous, were blessings calling forth her deepest outpourings of gratitude. Helen, however, was not elated by the prosperity that had befallen her. Her serious, well-poised mind, while it gratefully acknowledged, trembled at the magnitude of the blessings showered upon her ; and humble and fervent were her supplications that she might so use these gifts as one day to be held blameless, though not in her own merits, by that Almighty Being who had thus richly endowed her. That firm Christian principle which enabled her to submit with cheerful patience under temporary adversity, now proved Helen's sure unfailing guide in prosperity. She knew this world to be a vast chequered scene, a world of alternate gloom and sunshine, and she set a watch over her heart as one who knows not what the next day may bring forth. As for Sir Gerard, language appeared powerless to express his devotion, when he gazed on her earnest features, and daily and hourly beheld in their expression of deep, trustful happiness, the hold which he possessed over her heart. Day after day found them still lingering at Greysdon, until a lively reprimand from Mildred, and a rousing appeal from Lady Catherine, admonished them both that this exclusive enjoyment of each other's society must for the present cease.

Lord Alresford's ample acknowledgments, and his anxiety to do Helen justice, were keenly appreciated both by Mr. and Mrs. Campbell ; and the latter, even in the full glow of her joy and triumph when exhibiting Sir Gerard's devotion to the admiring gaze of the village, heroically declared that, could she thereby mark her sense of the earl's kind condescension,

she would consent to her daughter's immediate departure for Amesbury without an hour's needless delay. Helen's journey thither, however, was finally arranged for the Tuesday before Lady Catherine's wedding-day; Mrs. Campbell being somewhat reconciled to the parting by her extreme gratification that her daughter was to officiate with Miss Conway as bridesmaid on that occasion.

As for Mildred, words can inadequately paint the perfect content and happiness which now diffused itself over every act and incident of her life. From that eventful evening when dissimulation had been thrown from her, the change in her feelings can alone be likened to the rapid burst of spring in a northern clime; where, under the ardent sunbeams, dreary sombre wastes become, in a few hours, verdant meadows enamelled with flowers and foliage: for no less suddenly had happiness pervaded Mildred's spirit. The training had been rude, but at length that inestimable gift of self-knowledge was its reward. She learned to distrust herself, to doubt the infallibility of her own conclusions; she realised the wisdom of cool, dispassionate judgment; and above all she was taught to shun and abhor that disingenuous and unworthy cavilling with truth, which had well nigh wrought such disastrous consequences. Her life at present appeared one long dream of happiness; so novel to her was that fresh feeling of love and confidence which replaced the miserable suspense and dissatisfaction of the preceding months. No lingering feeling now of pique or embarrassment repressed the joyful welcome, or the smile which parted Mildred's beautiful lips, whenever her husband sought her society. She saw the truth and intensity of his affection, and wondered how she ever could have doubted. "Happiness is a joy realised only in this world by its contrast with misery: were we exempt from the pangs of the latter, happiness would be an ideal," says an eminent casuist; and Mildred experienced this joy in its utmost intensity, as she listened to the words of trustful love which now fell from the earl's lips, and recalled the anxiety and foreboding so long her bane.

Days thus sped on until the time came which was to bring Helen Campbell back to Amesbury. Unlike the afternoon of her friend's former arrival, Mildred passed her hours of suspense other than in feverish, restless wanderings: she sat in her boudoir, her elbow resting on the table before her, on which lay her drawing and various other trifling articles of feminine occupation. Autumn had robbed her garden of much of its beauty, but still the gorgeous hues of the heavens, as the sun sank to rest, cast a warmth over the landscape without. Her face was turned towards the window, and she thought; but no furrow of care contracted her brow, bathed ever and

anon in the faint golden light. Presently the door opened, and Lord Alresford entered. Mildred joyfully arose.

"You have kept your promise, and have not been long absent," exclaimed she, advancing towards him.

"No: but yet I have accomplished that which took me to Avington; while you, Mildred, what have you been doing? I left you sitting precisely as I find you, with that leaf half sketched and the whole group of flowers every whit as much advanced," said the earl, laughingly, as he glanced at the drawing before her, kissed the cheek turned towards him, and sat down by her side.

"I have been thinking, Alresford, how grateful my great present happiness ought to make me; and comparing it with the incertitude which tortured me five weeks ago, when I before expected dear Helen. I can scarcely imagine, now, the indescribable feeling which kept me away, when my heart pined to be with you."

"Or the foolish shyness that made you contritely apologise for your intrusion into my room, and many similar absurdities. Do you remember, Mildred, the difficulty I had in detaining you for a few minutes in the trap into which Miss Tennyson so unsuspectingly lured you?"

"Nay, I think you did your best to frighten me away by the vehemence of your reprimand. Confess that you were then very angry with me."

"I do not deny it. I was not then initiated into the guiding maxim of your conduct, Mildred; or be sure my remedy would have been different throughout. I did not know that when you slighted me most you loved me best," replied the earl, laughing.

"Yet, Alresford, you then restored this ring."

"But you remember, Mildred, on what condition I gave it you back. You had not then owned yourself mine, or annulled the separation between us; therefore I could but attribute to momentary caprice your desire for its restoration, while you continued to evince such disregard for obligations still more recent, sacred, and binding."

"You have never yet told me how you regained possession of it from Colonel Sutherland," said Mildred, earnestly, drawing the ring from her finger.

"Easily enough, in comparison with your toils, my wayward wife," answered Lord Alresford, with a smile. "Mrs. St. Priest's courtesy was unsurpassed, though my sudden visit startled even her practised dissimulation. When I firmly insisted that your name should be withdrawn from public mention, with infinite presence of mind, she not only promised compliance, but offered, as she perceived the whole affair was disagreeable to you, to sacrifice the paragraph. With her

most insinuating smile, Mrs. St. Priest then assured me, that she could not compare the gratification of her own and Edward's vanity with the satisfaction of affording you even momentary pleasure."

"Dissembler! But Colonel Sutherland——"

"Did not make his appearance. I suppose his assurance was scarcely equal to an interview with me. Mrs. St. Priest, when I demanded the ring, at first tried to put me off with excuses, that she knew not where to find it during Colonel Sutherland's absence, and assured me that it should be forwarded to Amesbury in the course of the afternoon. However, after I made her clearly comprehend that it was not my intention to quit her house without it, she left the room, and in a short time returned, saying, that, fortunately, she had found the ring on her boudoir table amongst several articles just returned from the jewellers' at Avington. I made no comment on the glaring falsity of her excuse; but having obtained what I wished, I immediately took my leave."

"To what vexations has my past folly exposed you!" exclaimed Mildred, earnestly and sadly.

"Now, my own Mildred, the past is more than repaired, and I look back on it as other than the deed of her whose affection is the most precious treasure I possess," replied the earl, as his arm encircled her.

A few tears moistened her dark eyes as she turned them from him.

"And yet you would have left me," murmured she, reproachfully.

"As my only resource. Mildred, dearest, did not I well perform my promise never to tyrannise over your affection?"

"Yes; you justly abandoned me to the punishment of my waywardness," murmured she hastily, assiduously pursuing her occupation.

"There is still one more of your past misdemeanours, Mildred, which I have to call you to account for. What was the reason of your sudden and provoking desire to go to town soon after our marriage?"

A vivid blush overspread Lady Alresford's face.

"Nay, why did you refuse to let me go? Confess that it was a most abominable act of tyranny on your part," replied she, hurriedly parrying the question.

"I know you do not now think so. What whim then possessed you, Mildred?" asked the earl, laughing.

"Lady Catherine——" replied Mildred, bending over her drawing. "But I do not intend to afford any further explanation of the matter," replied she suddenly, in her former lively tones, turning towards the earl with a smile.

"Perhaps, Mildred, had I yielded to this sudden impulse, I should have lost you for ever?"

"Hush! I peremptorily forbid, my lord, any more allusion to past events," exclaimed she, playfully putting her hand across the earl's lips. "It is, however, a most consolatory fact to know that my late imaginary rival is now beyond the reach of giving me further anxiety; and to render my triumph and satisfaction complete, I have only to make your lordship acknowledge that I may for the future follow my own good pleasure, and go to town when I choose. May I do this?"

"Provided you do not make an arbitrary use of your power and insist upon going alone," replied Lord Alresford, laughingly.

She smiled; then, disengaging her hand from his grasp, resumed her employment. Lord Alresford presently rose.

"What is all this about, Mildred? Are you filling this splendid-looking volume with an essay on the hardships of matrimony?" asked he suddenly; and taking her journal from its stand, he quickly glanced over its leaves.

Lady Alresford started hurriedly from her seat, and took the book from the earl's hands. A deep blush overspread her beautiful face.

"It is a diary, I see. Did I not once before nearly surprise its secrets? What treason have you been writing, that its contents are so carefully guarded?" asked the earl, laughingly; attempting again to take the book from her.

Her white hands retained their hold of the book with nervous eagerness.

"I cannot, indeed, show it you, dear Alresford. This book was my solace during our days of alienation: in my lonely hours I used to amuse myself with noting down all manner of absurd suppositions, and it is therefore such a record of past follies that I should blush for it to meet your eye!"

"Nay, let me read, Mildred. Let me read the workings of your heart during those days," rejoined Lord Alresford, earnestly.

"I cannot. Ask anything rather than this, Alresford. Besides, I do not choose to indulge your vanity by the perusal," said she, with a smile, attempting to walk away with the book in her hand. Soon, however, she was detained by his encircling arm.

"Mildred, give me this last and only remaining proof of love and confidence in your power to bestow. Let me read this record of your most secret thoughts."

Mildred trembled. The tones of the earl's voice thrilled her heart, and she felt it vain to resist such entreaty. Unresistingly, she now suffered him to take the volume from her hand. Her soft eyes were bathed in tears—tears of pleasurable,

neartfelt emotion, as he drew her again to his side. With her fair cheek sometimes wet with tears, then dimpled with smiles, resting on his bosom, she watched his progress. So absorbed were they that they heeded not the swift lapse of time ; and Mildred, some hours afterwards, was only roused from her trance of happiness by a low knock at the boudoir door. It immediately opened, and on the threshold stood some one, apparently hesitating whether to advance or retreat. A cry of joy escaped Lady Alresford's lips as she started from her husband's arms, and flung herself on the neck of her faithful friend Helen Campbell.

We need not dilate on Helen's joy at the ocular evidence which first greeted her of her beloved friend's new found happiness, nor on the cordial, almost brotherly welcome she received from Lord Alresford : a friendship and esteem which never after varied, and which Helen always prized as one of her choicest privileges.

On the day appointed, Lord Normanton received from the earl Lady Catherine's hand. Her noble, energetic character suffered no deterioration from contact with the world. Unswervingly she fulfilled the duties of her station and calling, and though lights and shadows diversified her allotted path in life, blessings predominated. If in after years a blush would occasionally tingle in Lady Normanton's cheeks, as she recalled her youthful imprudence at Narbonne, yet deep and fervent was her gratitude for the happiness which had sprung therefrom ; and as she gazed on the noble, intellectual countenance of her husband, and felt that his continued love was her brightest earthly gift, involuntary words of thanksgiving would arise from that overruling Providence which ordained that such abundant joy should result from what was once the source of the keenest misery and suspense.

Mrs. Otway never quitted her beloved friend and pupil. Happy in Lady Normanton's felicity, her days glided tranquilly by ; the greatest and most stirring event of her after life being the occasion when those objects of Mrs. St. Priest's antipathy, the cotton anti-macassars and covers, were gradually supplanted by delicate fabrics of silk and wool, which finally transformed themselves into tiny articles of infant apparel. It was perfectly marvellous to contemplate the extent of the good old lady's labours in this line ; for not only did she benefit Witham by her indefatigable industry, but actually extended her favours to Amesbury also : unable, as she averred, to withstand the fascinating smile of that sweet, pretty Lady Alresford.

Within four months after Lady Normanton's marriage, Helen Campbell became the wife of Sir Gerard Baynton. At Lord Alresford's especial desire, she was married from Ames-

bury. Great and infinite, therefore, was Mrs. Campbell's triumph; though even her heedless loquacity was subdued, when she gratefully spoke of her daughter's fortunate lot, and of Helen's happiness in possessing so warm and true-hearted a friend as Lady Alresford: one likewise who had effectually and perseveringly promoted her interest in life.

Colonel Sutherland met the fate of most unprincipled men, when foiled in their base schemes on the happiness or reputation of others: with this aggravation, that his love for Mildred was deep, ardent, and lasting; as it was selfish and unscrupulous. Her image perpetually rose to taunt him; while, with unspeakable bitterness, he was compelled to acknowledge that he was nothing to her: nay, he knew, so absolute was her forgetfulness, that not even a thought of him arose to trouble the calm tenor of her life. Now and then he caught a glimpse of her in public; and the sight of her placid brow and happy smile added bitterness to his regrets. After a year or two of reckless dissipation, Colonel Sutherland quitted the army, and betook himself to a listless, roving life on the continent: perpetually in search of that happiness, which ever fled from his pursuit; forgetting that they who would win this precious boon, must first take Principle as their unerring guide, for the attainment of that peace which, without it, is vainly, fruitlessly sought.

Foiled in her malicious designs, Mrs. St. Priest discovered on her return home, after an absence of six months, that the local distinction for which she so assiduously toiled had vanished. Of course, she found the doors of Amesbury closed against her; and Sir Gerard Baynton and Lord and Lady Normanton followed the example of Lord Alresford. Supported only by Miss Isabella Conway and her mother, whom the former worried into espousing her friend's quarrel, Mrs. St. Priest, incapable of making head against such formidable discountenance, had the supreme, though well-merited, mortification of learning that the universal popularity she had hitherto boastfully enjoyed, unsupported by hereditary prestige or goodness of her own, was merely an ingenious method devised by little people to pay indirect court to great ones; and that now, on the same principle, at the nod of the latter, hitherto her supposed patrons, none could be more obligingly eager than her former devoted friends to hasten her downfall. Despite this unpalatable lesson, Mrs. St. Priest, nevertheless, fought strenuously to recover her lost position: but Lady Alresford, keenly alive to the peril she had escaped, was too indignant, when she reflected on the treachery of the plot for her overthrow, and the audacity of the subtle *intriguante* in presuming to tamper with feelings so sacred, ever again to

hold out the hand of friendship ; and her fiat was deemed conclusive in the neighbourhood.

From the generosity of her designing coadjutor, Colonel Sutherland, Mrs. St. Priest, as was fitting she should do, met with some compensation for the loss of her popularity. Though her promise had not been realised, it was neither for lack of good will nor exertion on her part ; therefore, in due time, the Cotgrove estate, the wages of her contemplated iniquity, owned her for its mistress. In the autumn of the following year she quitted for ever the scene of her humiliation, and took up her abode in the northern county where her new possessions lay ; with a heart angered and revengeful, perpetually lamenting the position her own evil conduct had forfeited, wrestling ever with envy and discontent : a lamentable spectacle, in her frivolity, of the misery wrought by the absence of high actuating principle and undeviating perseverance in the path of rectitude.

Mon-Bijou, restored to its pristine appellation of "The Briars," soon after Sir Gerard's marriage became the abode of Lady Emily Baynton ; and if example were wanting to exhibit the beauty of a life of Christian consistency and usefulness, it was found in Lady Emily's character.

Mr. Egremont Turville kept his word, and went abroad the day after his cousin's marriage with Lord Normanton. After wandering for two years in various parts of Europe, he returned home, heart-whole—cured of his disappointment. Lady Normanton, during the period of his absence, was Mr. Turville's constant correspondent ; and whether, with womanly ingenuity, she cleverly seized the opportunity, and contrived to interest him in the prospects and daily actions of her loved and cherished sister Maude, we cannot tell. Certain it is, however, that soon after his return, Lady Normanton had the happiness of seeing her long-projected scheme realised ; and Maude Conway, with feelings deeper and far more real than the feverish attachment she once professed for Colonel Sutherland, at length became the wife of Mr. Turville ; and we are bound to record, that after this event he never was detected in a lingering sigh or a passing regret, as he contemplated Lord Normanton's domestic happiness.

Miss Tennyson married Mr. Frank Norwood, and partook with him, to her heart's content, of that life of bustling conviviality and change which she loved so well. Under his skillful training she learned to bet on a race with a critical confidence worthy of the keenest and most inveterate *habitué* of the turf ; while in her hunting feats she sometimes distanced and kept at bay a whole field of veteran sportsmen : yet, always generous and open-hearted, Mrs. Norwood scrambled through life with amazing popularity amongst her set. Suited ad-

mirably to her husband (who ever looked upon her as a prodigy), immersed in the rattle and excitement of her busy life, whilst youth and health lasted, Clara thought herself at the summit of human felicity ; and at this point, therefore, we will bid her farewell.

Sir Richard Tennyson's career, after his union with Miss Vincent, was a total contrast to that of his sister ; though, at the period of his marriage, his tastes and habits were very much in accord with hers. The drooping, sentimental Caroline, soon after she became Lady Tennyson, did not long delay demonstrating her abhorrence of the boisterous jests and hilarity of her husband's boon companions, or in issuing the mandate which from thenceforth excluded them from her drawing-room. The same decree also daringly struck at another grievance, and remorselessly debarred from the like privilege Sir Richard's favourite hounds ; who were no longer allowed to stretch their noble limbs on the hearthrugs, or, in their rude gambols with their master, to overturn tables and smash choice articles of porcelain : events of daily occurrence under the dowager's rule, who never dare hint at, still less carry out, such sweeping innovations. Lady Tennyson, moreover, signified it to be her pleasure that Sir Richard should forthwith adjure horsebreaking ; and, in short, condemned his whole outer man to undergo the transformation necessary to impart to it that dignity indispensable to the happy individual who called her wife, and who owned, besides, the broad acres of Settringham. Fortunately, Sir Richard idolised his little simpering, though determined wife, and good-naturedly yielding first one thing and then another to her whims, gradually the lapse of four or five years sobered him down into a hale country gentleman, kind-hearted and generous ; not over refined, though wise enough to tolerate, while he laughed at, the follies of the fine people with whom it was Lady Tennyson's pleasure to fill his house.

Mrs. Wedderbourne, though momentarily chagrined that her niece had failed to secure a coronet, eschewed her visionary schemes of aggrandisement when she beheld the solid honours which Miss Vincent's alliance with Sir Richard Tennyson brought. At her death, therefore, some years subsequently, the judge's famous gold epergne, and the manor of Dornton, were found duly bequeathed to her beloved niece, Dame Caroline Tennyson of Settringham, for the term and period of her life ; and afterwards to her second son by Sir Richard, on condition that he assumed the surname and arms of Wedderbourne.

Lord and Lady Elvaston, as may be supposed, participated heartily and thankfully in their daughter's happiness ; and the ensuing winter was one of unmingled enjoyment to all.

Mildred never forgot the lesson inculcated by the severe ordeal she had passed. Her reasoning powers were quickened, and she saw the danger of yielding to hasty, impetuous conclusions. Her perfect confidence in her husband's affection was never afterwards shaken. Relying with the firmest trust on his unswerving honour, and ever confiding in his judgment and experience, her love formed the pride and solace of his future life. At the expiration of two years from the date of his marriage, Lord Alresford again mingled and took an active share in public affairs; and then, though the wife of one of the most distinguished and influential statesmen of the day, Mildred was never dazzled by the adulation tendered to her wit, beauty, and rank: if her beautiful cheek ever glowed with a flush of gratified pride or vanity, it was at the recital of her husband's praises, at the universal homage paid to his lofty integrity and distinguished talents.

Happy in her husband's love and approbation, the world lost to her that false glitter so alluring, yet so dangerous. Lady Alresford, therefore, though prosperous and admired, an idolised wife and a cherished daughter, having learned from experience what subtle snares beset the human heart, how plausible its deceit, and resolute its strivings after evil; and knowing, to quote the words of the eloquent Abbé Nicole, "*que le cœur est le milieu qui altere la couleur naturelle des objets, et qui nous les fait paroître autres qu'ils ne sont en effet*;" from thenceforth controlled its promptings with jealous prayerful vigilance, and her laudable endeavours were finally rewarded by that pearl of blessings—abundant inward peace.

THE END.

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